

Scaling Oath Mountain

By Derek Ian Cantwell

Second Online Edition



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By Derek Ian Cantwell

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Scaling Oath Mountain

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Dedicated to Luke

ἄλλοι
City States
ἑτεροῖς

Alliance of Caryae

Valis

Tegea

Korynthos

Cadmeia

Meyara

Psario

Murvia

Melosa

Alliance of Aoethai

Phedias

Mantineia

Khora

Zynthus

Platya

Rodosi

Punma

Map of Rodauce

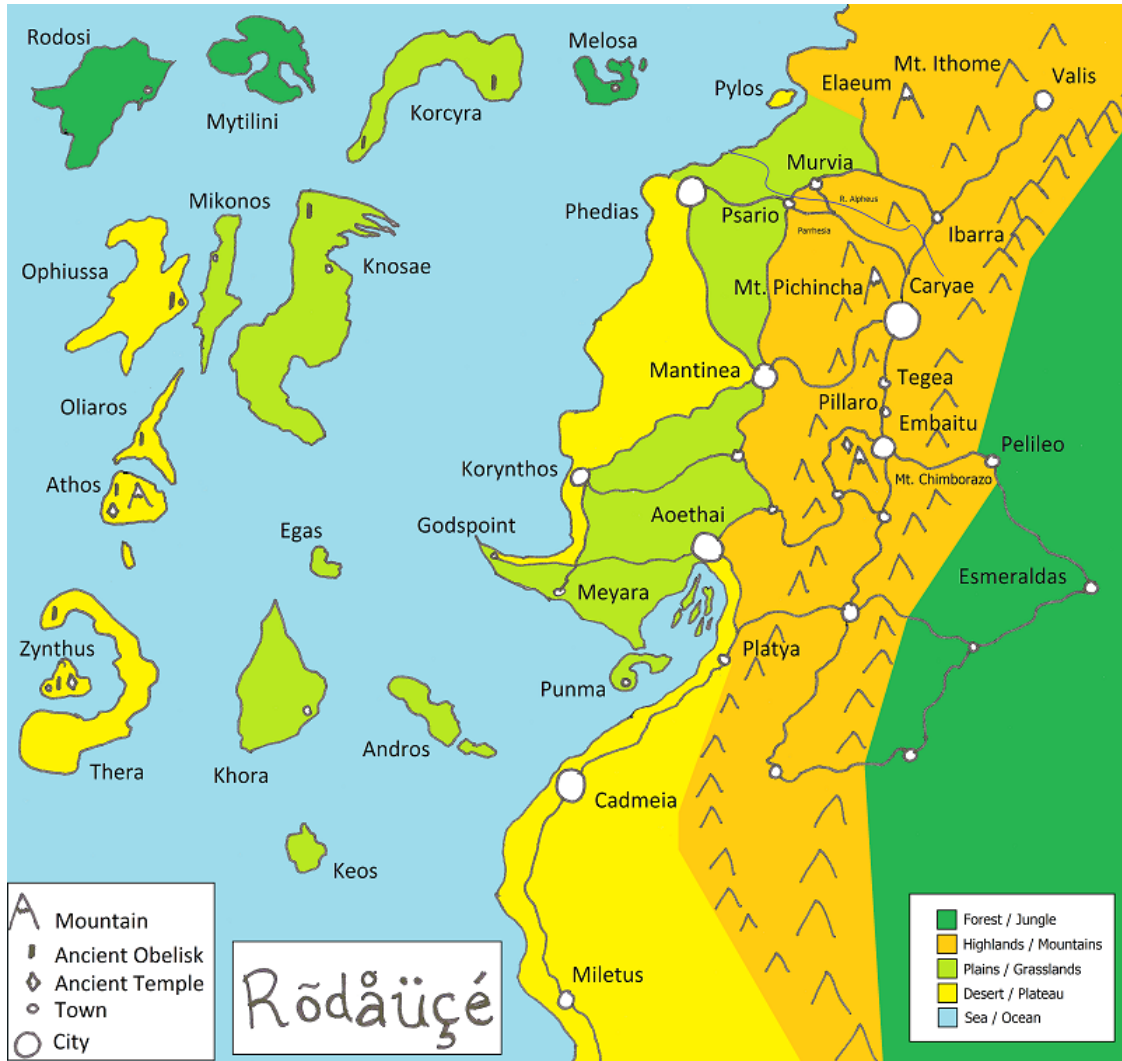


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Prologue

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Tica and Ardal

“Time is Change.”

~ Rucrem

Thunderous rain fell with fury. Tica held the baby against her chest. She stepped carefully under mangrove branches. Water was above her waist. “*Forgive us Fathers, Forgive us Mothers,*” she whispered into the baby’s ear, “*we know not what we do.*” She hoped the Spirits were watching. The boy was borne from sin.

Tica saw the Hidden Temple through the downpour. The Master practiced atop the stone megalith. The circular pyramid had three main steps. An enclosure at the top served as the Master’s quarters. The Master had practiced alone for decades. She had known the Hidden Temple all her life. The elders said the Old Spirits had built it to sacrifice men.

The Shamans had forbidden anyone from going near it. Tica would not always listen to them. She was caught on her 8th birthday. Her parents stood by as she was given twelve lashes in the muddy village square. She was careful since then. As an adult she had never been so close.

Master Ardal met her at the first step. He extended his hand and helped her out of the water. She kept her eyes on her feet. The stairs were strange. No mortar. It was all cut from one enormous block. She saw a carved serpent on each side of the steps.

Tica was young when the Master first arrived from Land’s End. Ardal sought sanctuary in the Hidden Temple. He asked the elders first but they denied him. They declared him a looter. They banned him from ever visiting the holy site, saying that he would only desecrate it.

Tica had been happy to show the way. After offering her name, she learned his was Ardal. He had been a soldier for a Blood King. He was in search of solitude. He never spoke with anyone again. No one had lived in the Temple before. The Shamans called him foul names. Once they gathered at the mangroves to yell at him. Master Ardal ignored them and continued to meditate.

Once out of the rain, the Master brought Tica a blanket. He laid out a cup of warm canelazo and a bowl of rice and corn. He held his hands out with a smile. She gave him the child and reached for the warm cup. The Master cradled the baby and rocked him gently. It was the first time the boy had been quiet and calm.

“What is his name, Tica?” The Master spoke lovingly.

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She was startled that he remembered her. She had been so young. She had since mothered and survived five children. Then Tica noticed he hadn't aged a day. He still appeared to be youthful and energetic.

"His mother died before giving him a name, Master." Tica averted her eyes.

"Who was his mother?" He gently wiped rain drops from the baby's forehead.

"A girl from my village who gave her parents heartache. She was caught stealing from the Chief." Tica shook her head to ward off the memory. She sipped the hot canelazo. "He abused her. The boy is the result. His mother was exiled and attacked by a jaguar. Poor thing barely made it to my hut. She knew that I was a Known of Herbs. She begged me to help her..."

"You could only save the child." Ardal said softly.

Tica nodded.

"I took him to the Shamans." She took another sip from the canelazo. "They said he was born cursed."

"No child is born cursed." The Master shook his head with sadness.

"They say his mother was a witch." Tica let her eyes fall to the floor. "They say we must sacrifice him to appease the Spirits."

"Killing only appeases an inner darkness."

Other men arrived seeking Ardal. He was a Known in every jungle kingdom. The first men wore purple and carried banners. Later the heavily armed men wore their own emblems. Each arrived with the same quest: defeat Ardal in single combat. Each failed. Master Ardal was undefeated.

"I brought him to the only Holy place I know..." Tica looked up at the Master again. "This is the only place he will be safe."

"I will protect him while he lives here." Ardal looked comfortable in fatherhood.

"Will he become a Known of Fighting as you are?" Tica couldn't help but be excited for the boy. He would know the sacred techniques. "Will he be able to conquer any man like you?"

"The goal of Shotozen is not to conquer other men." He looked down at the baby as he spoke. "The point is to conquer the self."

Time has washed away his name, Tica realized. Ten years had passed since anyone had arrived to challenge him. He had been swallowed by the Hidden Temple. Tica had followed him when she was younger, but he would disappear into the trees. Tica's sons had discovered the same. No one knew if he so much as farmed or fished.

"The Shamans said the boy was an ill omen. They say it signals an age of war." Tica hoped to learn with her limited time. "Why would holy men wish death upon a child?"

"Men make war, not children. Men wish death by their own ignorance. They do this because they fear change." Master held the sleeping baby in one arm and took a sip of canelazo. "They manifest many ways to justify their actions."

"But the baby's mother..." Tica could still hear the screams in her head. "She said the child was her curse. How could she see life as a curse?"

"It's easy to curse that which does not conform to our pride." Ardal spoke more to himself than to Tica. He nodded as if making a decision.

"What brought you here, Master?" Tica lifted rice and corn from the bowl to her mouth with wrinkled fingers. The food was delicious, and she ate hungrily.

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“I had traveled to Land’s End hoping to learn about its culture. The city states there were constantly at war. Every kingdom thought itself the rightful ruler of the Nozama Delta. I discovered the monks of Shotozen and joined their order.” Master Ardal paused, handing the baby back to Tica. “Shotozen monks stood with King Sterzhen when the region was invaded by Lodka. Together they defeated the invaders.”

Ardal spooned more helpings of rice and corn into Tica’s bowl.

“Thank you, Master.” Tica bowed her head over the baby.

“I was determined to put an end to the violence. King Sterzhen controlled the only castle built on the Nozama River. I asked the King for the privilege of tutoring his young son and heir, Prince Huascar. I spent nine years with the Prince.”

Tica would not interrupt him. She had never heard the name of a Blood King. The baby began to squirm and stretch. She tried to rock him back to sleep, hoping that Ardal would continue. He stood at the door staring out at the dark clouds.

“I arranged a marriage between Huascar and the Princess of the inland kingdom of Puyvia. Huascar and his younger brother conquered the coast. After Huascar was crowned, he told me his brother had been plotting to have him assassinated. I defended his brother and told him that he could not be capable of such a thing.” Master Ardal looked back at the boy in Tica’s arms, “Huascar was at war with himself. He justified the massacre and his brother’s murder.”

Tica finally understood why Master Ardal had sought asylum. Like the Shamans and Chiefs of her village, the jungle kings were unjust and brutal. All her life she had thought that places beyond the jungle would be different.

“Huascar ordered the death of the Shotozen monks. He called them traitors. He burned down their Monastery. Huascar levied a bounty on my head that could field an army.” Pain filled the Master’s eyes. “It was clear that my Laws would not be heeded. I have never left a city with so much heartache.”

“If you had not left Land’s End,” Tica spoke timidly. She looked down at the baby in her arms. “you would not have been here to protect this boy.”

Master Ardal sat down across from Tica. “That is true.”

“I’ve lost every son.” The boy looked up at Tica and smiled. His eyes were bright spheres of joy. Tica felt her heart melt. “I saw my husband’s face grow scales like a lizard. I watched his fingers shrivel up like the roots of a dying tree. The Shamans buried him moons ago. I will have no more sons.”

“He will grow up here, but should have access to the outside world.” Ardal drained his canelazo. Ardal let out a resolved sigh and looked at the boy. “Ask passing boats and merchants for spices and literature. Every full moon, bring him foreign food and books.”

“It would be an honor.” Tica bowed her head reverently. The thought of being close to the Temple once a month was incredible. Her heart skipped. She tried to keep calm. “But what should the boy be called?”

“His name shall be Iota. Neither the sky nor earth may claim him from the Law.”

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Chapter 1

KING ACT I

Metal Tempest

“Stranger! Bear this message to our brethren,
Here we lie, trusting in their laws.”
Inscription at Thermopylae

The training yard was full of young soldiers. Two dozen boys took turns on the javelin range. Everyone became quiet when Anax stepped up. Their sneering whispers and jovial banter had ended. All eyes lay upon the boy prince.

Anax heaved his javelin toward the pile of white stones. His javelin struck the topmost stone. Anax lifted his arms up in triumph. He turned to celebrate. The crowd was laughing and dancing. The older ones pointed and cackled.

“You were over the line!” one boy jumped for joy.

“Royals think they can get away with anything!” The boy with scars on his face pointed his javelin at Anax. “His father defies the Senate.”

“My father was victorious at Platya!” Anax made fists and dropped into a fighting stance. “He upholds the Law!”

“He dresses as if he is auditioning for the Bronze King!” The other boys formed a circle around them. The scar-faced boy tossed his javelin into the dirt. “King Archus has betrayed the Old Ways of Caryae.”

“The Ephors spread those lies!” Anax yelled to the crowd.

The crowd roared back insults and curses.

“He’s a traitor!” Miltiades, a general’s son, yelled. The other boys nodded.

“My father is no traitor!” Anax charged.

They fought until Anax lay on the ground with a bloody nose. Miltiades lay beside him with a bloody jaw. In the end they laughed together. The insults were forgotten and the fight became their bond. The other boys grabbed Anax and pulled him to his feet.

“I say we break one of his legs,” one of the Senator’s sons smirked.

“Let’s break both,” the other chuckled.

“I’ll break both your skulls against one another!” Sergeant Tilius barked. He swatted the two boys and pointed at Anax. “You and Miltiades will run circuits around this yard until I feel like you’ve had enough!”

Sore from their fight, Anax and Miltiades started their laps. Tilius broke up the rest of the group and got them back to javelin practice. Anax lost count of the laps. His legs were chaffed and burning. Tilius would bark every time one of them would slow down. The others finished with the day’s practice and Tilius didn’t let up. Anax lost count of the hours.

ὄρη Δωδοῖς

Anax's blood had dried, his bruises ached, but he was happy to be walking. The walk from the training grounds home was a welcome break from Tilius' punishment. As he neared his village Anax heard yelling and cursing. He walked around a house and saw a great commotion of bodies. Outside of the Temple of Lyceus was a crowd huddled around a wagon.

"Here we have a treasonous King! He hides in the Temple because he cannot face his people in a trial!" The pale faced Ephor commanded the crowd from the back of a wagon. He wore the Seal of the State and held a torch. "We must dispose of King Archus before he destroys everything we have!"

"He is guilty of inciting the slaves to revolt!" A sun burnt Ephor added from the ground. "He has conspired with the Bronze King! He seeks to be the tyrant of Caryae!"

The crowd screamed profanities. Many called for the King's head. Anax refused to believe his father could want that for his family. Anax's ancestors had established the Constitution to protect the valley from tyrants.

"Drag this traitorous King out of the Temple!" The first Ephor called to the mob.

"No! I brought this to punish my husband for his crimes." Anax's mother held a rock above her head. "But if he is a coward then let him starve. But he must not die inside, lest we earn the wrath of heaven."

"Board up the Temple! Make sure he can't sneak out!" The superstitious Ephors were quickly convinced. "Let him out only to die."

ὄρη Δωδοῖς

The monument to Leonidas stood solemn in the cold rain. A chilly gust sent flowers tumbling down the road. Anax knelt before the stone statue of his grandfather. Leonidas held his sword out and his shield high. His mother had led him by his bruised elbow. The angry mob roared behind them. She knelt next to him in the grass.

"I don't think he was a traitor." Anax's shoulders felt too heavy.

"I don't care what you think. I care what that mob thinks. Defend a traitor and you are a traitor." She put her hands on his cheeks and looked into his eyes urgently. She gave out a heartfelt sigh. "No one trusts a traitor. Not even family. They will not let you be King if they think you're like him."

"How can I disown my father?" Tears formed in Anax's eyes.

"What was the answer to the Bronze King at Thermopylae?" His mother's voice became tender. "What did your grandfather say, when ordered to give up his sword?"

"Come and take it." Anax sniffled.

"Yes. He never said come and *buy* it. If your father was a traitor then it began with his love of metal. Metal is no good exchange for anything." She lifted up a blood red crystal and held it before Anax's eyes. "This is Jasper. It was forged by Vejovis in a volcano far before you were born. No pile of silver could buy this. You were made in the same way. Your worth is more than your weight in metal."

"What am I worth?" Anax shivered in the cold.

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“You were made by the gods. Do what you must for the good of your city. You must defend us from everything, especially ourselves.” She handed him the red jasper. He looked down at the blood stone. “To be a good King you must make sure that you are free to act. A decision not acted upon is no decision at all.”

The Queen pointed out at the mountains.

“Those bow to no man. The only power a man has over you is the power you give him. No man’s metal, and no man’s authority should ever stop you from doing what is right for Caryae.”

“Look at Leonidas. He was the greatest of us. That jasper in your hand remembers the volcano. Remember your bloodline. Caryae is the greatest city in the world. Its fate will rest upon your shoulders. Prove that you can stand with the phalanx.”

She handed Anax his father’s sword and shield.

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Chapter 2

PONTIFEX ACT I

Burning City

“Godspoint sent His *[only]* son to teach the Truth.”
Gem 3-22, *Holy Doctrines NE*

İzmir ran fingers through his long wavy hair one last time. It would no longer stand between his head and heaven. People would recognize him as a servant of the Spire. İzmir sat in the middle of a stage before an audience of white robed superiors. The deacons wearing brown sat in the back. The sky was clear. The sun was high.

“Most of you need no reminder of the Bronze Wars. Khora was the first to see barbarians at its walls. Today we witness İzmir. İzmir’s father died defending Godspoint and Khora.” Pontifex Marcus licked his lips. He walked around İzmir methodically. “His mother prayed day and night for victory. She promised Godspoint that her son would grow up in this very Spire. Heaven is her reward.”

Marcus held onto İzmir’s shoulders. The Presbyters smiled and nodded. Presbyter Libitina wiped away a joyful tear. Their approval made İzmir’s heart glow. He had never been the center of attention. He loved it.

“İzmir ends his life as an acolyte. He begins his life as a deacon. He has a sharp mind and unwavering loyalty. I have faith that one day he will hold my office.” Pontifex motioned to the senior deacon. “As he is reborn, let us praise Godspoint for delivering him to us.”

The senior deacon presented a silver dagger to the audience. It glittered in the sun. The deacon used the dagger to shave İzmir’s head. Locks of hair fell to the ground. When the deacon smacked his bald head it echoed against the back walls. The congregation clapped in unison. He felt the cool sea air on the top of his head.

İzmir walked to the Spire’s altar and lifted the ceremonial candle.

“I vow to forever preach the *Holy Doctrines*. I swear to live by Godspoint and his only son. Nothing shall separate He from Me.” İzmir became mesmerized by the flame. He lifted the candle over his head and let wax drip onto his bare head. The wax burned. İzmir used his candle to light the Spire’s candle. “I shall remain pure and live as the poorest of my flock. I serve His Will.”

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İzmir had never been allowed to the top of the Spire before. Pontifex Marcus stood quietly as İzmir looked down from the highest balcony. İzmir could see the entire island. People filled the streets. Fishing boats littered the horizon.

“For two hundred years we’ve been a prosperous island. During the war for independence we all fought for freedom. Now you cannot find three men to defend it.”

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Pontifex Marcus sighed with heavy sadness. İzmir looked up at him. “Pride is in their hearts. Khora’s leaders are criminals. Despite my best efforts, they will not be swayed from sin.”

“Why do people hold onto false idols?” İzmir waited anxiously.

“A pious life requires sacrifice. Most men are overcome with sin. They invite others to practice their hedonism.” The Pontifex pointed toward the city. “They have only exploited Aoethai... Now they take up arms against her!”

İzmir had never heard of a city rebelling against Aoethai. The Alliance had defeated the Bronze Empire. The common enemy had made rivals into family. Aoethai was the wisest brother city. *Who would bear arms against a brother?*

“What will the Aoethians do?” İzmir wondered if the Spire would be safe.

“They’ll tear down her walls. They’ll disband the garrison and confiscate the ships.” The Pontifex spoke coldly. “Khora will lose its vote in the Alliance. The Bronze Empire is watching for any sign of weakness. A civil war would encourage them. Rebellions must be put down quickly.”

A phalanx of bronze armored soldiers marched noisily toward the Spire. The Pontifex smiled and started down the stairs. İzmir followed. Pontifex Marcus straightened his robes. Two deacons pushed open the large oak doors. The soldiers had entered the courtyard and stood at attention.

“An example must be made. No one stands against Godspoint. We are judged by the strength of our convictions.” Pontifex leaned in and whispered into İzmir’s ear. “Leniency is a sign of weakness. We are strict because our Lord is Almighty.”

“Pleasure to see you again, sir,” The commander stepped out from the phalanx and saluted the Pontifex. He took off his helmet and waved toward the Spire. “Shall we?”

“You can trust to my newest deacon.” The old man looked at İzmir with a twinkle in his eyes. “What does the Assembly say?”

“I seek local heathens.” The commander shrugged and set his helmet on the ground. “I’m to remove any hostiles. Settlers from Aoethai will sail within days. Proper citizens will assume the land. The Assembly will govern until arrangements can be made. You are to remain in your position and coordinate the transition.”

“I am well prepared to help.” The old Pontifex gleefully led the commander in.

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The humid air was oppressive. İzmir walked behind the other deacons in a single file line. They wore their ceremonial robes and each carried the *Holy Doctrines*. They walked through the lesser temple district, the oldest part of the city. Some said that the old temples had altars designed for human sacrifice.

The senior deacon delicately carried a rolled parchment. He walked with his nose pointed to the clouds. He passed a group of beggars without looking in their direction. Everyone fell silent when they saw the deacons.

The Temple of Lyceus was bustling with activity. Anxious eyes turned toward them. İzmir saw the statue of Lyceus standing tall along the road. Lyceus held a thunderbolt in one hand. An eagle perched on his shoulder. Out of the crowd emerged a familiar face. Presbyter Libitina stepped up to the senior deacon with a nervous smile.

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“Thank Heavens, the Pontifex finally sends help!” İzmir had thought of Libitina as an uncle in the Spire. He was always full of warmth and compassion. His wife was a Priestess of Lyceus. They had worked for years bringing their faiths together.

“Stay in your temple.” İzmir had never heard the senior deacon disrespect a superior. “Godspoint judges all.”

“They say we will be put to death. I beg you, have the Pontifex speak sense with the Aoethians!” Libitina began to sob. Tears ran like rivers down his dirt covered face. “They have murder in their hearts... I trust the grace of Godspoint.”

“Stay in your temple.” The senior turned on his heel and left Libitina gasping for air. The rest of the deacons followed. The Aoethian headquarters had been set up inside city hall. The senior exchanged pleasantries with the commander. The senior deacon handed him the parchment. The commander unrolled it with great anticipation.

“Where shall we begin?” Commander smiled with blood lust in his eyes.

“Lyceus seems most fitting.” The senior deacon had a bounce in his step. He waved an arm over his deacon brothers. “We will keep the others from resisting. Tonight we free madmen from sinful coils.”

“Is Presbyter Libitina to be killed as well?” The others looked offended at İzmir’s question. He immediately felt shame. He was staring at his feet before the senior spoke.

“Just because you’re the favorite does not mean you can question me! I am carrying out the Lord’s command.” The senior deacon scoffed at him. “Laying with a heathen makes him a heathen. Don’t question me again.”

İzmir and the others then proceeded to go to the other temples. They told the other heathens that the temple of Lyceus had conspired against Aoethai. One by one, heathens were encouraged to return to their temple. Aoethian soldiers boarded them inside. The deacons returned to the Spire in time for evening prayer.

The temple fires burned brightly. İzmir fell asleep with the glow upon his face.

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Chapter 3

KING ACT II

Seismic Trident

“One needs both hammers and anvils for swords.”

~ Gasli, *Laphrian Fields*

Anax woke to the sound of crashing pottery. His bunk shuddered. The barracks shook violently. The other boys in were barely waking up. Anax made for the door. Older boys dragged sleeping juniors with them. Once outside everyone ran toward the river.

Houses were crumbling. Anax turned on his heel and saw rubble where there should be statues and buildings. The ground was in revolt. The valley echoed with terrified screams. Mount Pichincha pierced the night sky. The winter stars danced about the volcano.

Anax heard a deep rumble. Pichincha shook. Smoke rose from the slopes. A landslide swallowed the trees. He heard distant screams. The earth and rock had struck one of the villages. Many would be trapped. The frozen air caught in his throat.

Anax and the others spent until dawn helping people from ruins. King Damus arrived just as the sun crowned Pichincha. He had over thirty men with him. They were dressed for war. The shields reflected in Anax’s eyes.

“I need the men to come with me! This disaster has caused a rebellion against Caryae!” Damus pointed his spear westward. “We march immediately! Make ready!”

The men left to gather their gear. Anax walked up to the fully armored King.

“Let me go with you.” Anax looked at the rising sun. Some of the boys had already blamed the earthquake on his family. “I want to fight this uprising with you!”

“You’re not ready to lead men. Go lead the boys. Be a figurehead for the Senate.” Damus knelt down and motioned for Anax to approach him. He whispered into Anax’s ear. “We cannot trust the slaves in the valley. I had to put down a few already. Showing weakness will mean our peril. Stay in Caryae.”

ὄρη δὲ τῶν ἄλλων

Anax had not been in a private session of the Senate before. Anax assumed it was equal parts formality and test. He entered chamber without an introduction. The rubble filled hall had barely survived the earthquake. Caryae would need to be rebuilt.

“It’s important to have a King present. Although you will not have a King’s veto today, you might wield that power as a man.” Senator Rhetrae spoke from his seat. He wore a simple tunic and white trousers. He had gray hair and a wrinkled face. “Watch your government function.”

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Anax sat next to Rhetrae. He silently counted the Senators. All twenty eight were wrinkled and sour faced. Guards escorted a herald into the room. Anax recognized him as a soldier who had left with Damus. Anax had only heard rumors about the fighting.

“King Damus recovered the Eleaum countryside. The territory is stable again,” the herald fidgeted nervously. He scratched the bandages on his arm. “Resistance from Mount Ithome has been formidable. Several attempts at taking the bastion have failed.”

“The malcontents flee to their ancestral stronghold!” A balding man from the back threw his cup toward the stage.

“Damus will crush the insects.” Rhetrae dismissed the herald and turned to his peers. He stood up urgently. “We must crush Ithome before it sparks a wider uprising.”

Guards brought in two Aoethians. One a soldier with his helmet under his arm. The other an old man wearing regal clothing. He tied his hair the Old Caryaen Way. He bowed before the council and the soldier introduced him.

“This is General Cimon, elected by the Assembly as representative and commander. With him are 4,000 Aoethians to assist you.”

Anax considered it a good omen. No one had the siege expertise of the Aoethians. Other cities had only sent small phalanxes. Four thousand fresh troops would be a tremendous advantage. The rebels could be quelled before spring.

“You expect us to allow an army of revolutionary democrats into Eleaum?” an Ephor stepped up to the Aoethian General. Anax had not seen him before he spoke. *Where – and why- was he hiding?* The Ephor’s hawkish eyes stared at the Aoethians with contempt.

“I have supported Caryae all my life. I still contend that your constitution is the greatest ever written.” Cimon was offended by the accusation. His fists shook with frustration. “I stood before the Assembly and convinced them to send assistance!”

“We need nothing from Aoethai.” The Ephor’s words were soaked in condescension. “Damus will claim victory without hellions.”

“Are you sending home your other allies?” Cimon was stunned.

“The others are not such a liability as you. What is to stop you from turning against us?” The Ephor kicked a piece of marble across the floor. “We want none of the democratic zeal your city chiefly exports.”

“Decades of cooperation between our cities will be ruined.” Cimon pleaded with the Senators. He fell to his knees and began to sob. “My enemies will destroy both cities! If you send me home I will be exiled!”

The Senate chamber became eerily quiet. The Aoethians were led from the room.

“Aoethians bring nothing but radicalism.” Rhetrae broke the silence.

ὄρη Δωδεκάθετον

Senior Ephor Memphitus and Anax walked through a cold forest. They stepped on dead leaves. Anax had completed his training but he had not been selected for active duty. Memphitus had requested the nighttime meeting. Anax knew nothing else.

“I brought the charges against your father.” The Ephor stopped beside a tree. He looked Anax in the eye, searching it carefully. “He was making promises to the slaves. He wanted a throne and a crown.”

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“He was a traitor and a coward. Nothing else need be said.” Anax spoke coldly. He locked his eyes on the moon hanging beyond the trees. “I share blood with Leonidas. He served Caryae with legendary loyalty. That devotion flows through my veins.”

“We shall see. Autumn brings another Crypteia, war against the slaves. Take this dagger.” Memphitus led Anax to the hilltop. The hill overlooked a slave village. Memphitus spit toward the thatched huts. “We must teach them never to revolt again. Sneak into the village. Steal your food. Observe them. Do not be caught.”

“What is my purpose?” Anax had never had orders to kill before.

Anax looked down at the iron dagger in his hand.

“Find those speaking out against Caryae. Find the strongest.” The Ephor pointed to his palm. “Kill them. Return undiscovered with a bloody knife, and you will be a member of our order.”

Anax nodded to himself. He reminded himself to remain calm. The Crypteia was the most honorable of the military orders. He would get no second chance. The Ephor departed back the way they had arrived.

Anax slowly made his way toward the village. He followed the trees toward the huts. Two people were arguing near the nearest hut. One was an older boy twice his size. The other was a wrinkled woman wearing a brown scarf. She hurried after the boy.

“I won’t farm another day!” The boy started toward the muddy road. He was shoving an orange into a sack. “Not for you! Not for anyone!”

“Shut your mouth and get inside!” The woman threw her scarf over her shoulder. She stumbled in the ruts of the road. She could not keep up with his stride. “A patrol will find you!”

“You never listen! I’m not coming back!” He strutted away in defiance. He yelled back over his shoulder. “I want to be as far from here as possible!”

“Remember what they did to your father!” She dropped to her knees. She threw her arms into the air. “If they find you...”

“To hell with all of them!” Anax positioned himself behind the runaway. He stalked from tree to tree following the road. “They’re good for nothing!”

“Come home, please!” The old woman’s voice echoed up the hill.

Anax drove his blade into the boy’s heart.

Scaling Oath Mountain

Chapter 4

PONTIFEX ACT II

Unholy Sights

“Minds imprisoned hold the key.”
Judge 12-19, *Holy Doctrines*

The Great Spire cast its shadow over İzmir. High white bricks rose to the clouds. He had never been summoned to the High Council of Pontifices. The doors opened but İzmir saw no guards. The corridor was decorated with armor suits of gold and silver. The intricate carpet portrayed the fall of Muloch from heaven.

The wallpaper depicted man being banished from paradise. At the end of the hall were two enormous wooden doors. Carved into one door was the tree of life. On the other door a man held an apple. He wore a fig leaf apron with shameful eyes. The Mulochian snake coiled in the tree’s shadow.

The doors opened when İzmir stepped up. He still couldn’t see what moved the doors. Beyond was an enormous court. Lamps along the circular chamber kept the room brightly lit. Pontifex Budak stood at the threshold with a warm smile.

“Pontifex İzmir it is a pleasure!” Budak had long white nose hairs and a firm grip. He shook İzmir’s hand for too long. “I visited Khora on my way here. I was very impressed with your flock.”

İzmir beamed with joy. He never expected to be known in such prestigious halls. Pontifex Maximus Adamic brought the Council to order with three bangs of the gavel. The twelve Pontificies took their seats. İzmir felt like a child looking up at the bench.

“You are the newest edition to our Holy Order, İzmir. New Pontifices are always trusted with the most important mission work of their time.” Pontifex Pavelic spoke with a booming voice. “Make no mistake: these are perilous times. Heaven has ordained for you a great cause.”

The twelve men nodded in agreement. Adamic pointed his gavel at İzmir.

“Nestor was unsuccessful in Machala last year. That inspired a rebellion in Graikos. Aoethai cannot recapture them. Then there are the Megarans who, once again, betrayed us to Korynthos.” Adamic shook his head and tossed his gavel onto his bench. “For the first time in a decade a Caryaen army marches on Aoethai. These failures will reach the Bronze King... I can hear him sharpening spears...”

“You will travel to the island of Punma. The oligarchs have stopped paying tribute. Their grain is of vital importance if we are going to survive a siege.” Budak picked at his ear. “Nestor is distracted by the Caryaen invaders. You will attempt a diplomatic solution. The oligarchs are led by the House of Bouba.”

“Halkis must submit.” Adamic extended a hand over the bench offering a rolled parchment. İzmir took it with reverence. “Those that resist are subject to death or enslavement.”

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Leaving the Great Spire, İzmir felt a deep sense of pride. He was on a mission for Godspoint. He had the sanction of heaven. The sky was bright and clear. The sea was calm and inviting. All the days beneath the shadow of a Spire were preparation for this work. İzmir smiled at the dock workers with a bounce in his step.

ὄφκλῶκῆδ

“I appreciate such a warm welcome.” İzmir sipped his wine and admired the round arches of the Bouba mansion. The balcony overlooked the sparkling blue Egripos Strait. White sails brought boats into the Halkis harbor. “I was unsure of safe passage.”

“We do not persecute as some are so fond of doing.” The Bouba patriarch drained his silver cup. He wiped his beard and burped. “You’re far from Khora. Your arrival interests me.”

“I am a lowly servant of Godspoint.” İzmir bowed his head. “The Council wishes to ensure the Lord’s believers are being treated with the proper respect during the unrest.”

“This is a time of great change. Welcome change. My family has owned land in Halkis since the second flood. One of my ancestors fought outside Truva. My family became victors in the Lelantine War. My father sided with the Aoethians because he admired them.”

“Sixty years of safe commerce! You’ve become a prosperous with the protection of the world’s greatest fleet.” İzmir finished the dry wine. “War is always such a destructive thing when it visits a city. You can’t let peace be threatened.”

“My father was a fool. First, we were told our courts would operate in Aoethai. Next, we are forbidden from minting our own coins. The Bronze Empire is no longer a threat, yet we are made to pay a heavy annual tribute. Which are then spent on Temples in the Aoethian Acropolis.” Bouba did not hide his disdain. They walked around the porch that wrapped around the mansion. The fenced fields stretched out to the horizon. “How do such expenses serve my people? Our interests are consistently forsaken. Our leaders are selected by the Assembly. How is that called free?”

“That desert rat will always try to conquer Rōdāūçé. You have your land and your life. Your father was smarter than you realize. Aoethai is the mother of all the great cities in the world. No army can boast of greater victories. Behind their spears is the power of the Spires. To rebel against Aoethai is to rebel against Godspoint.”

“I recognize many gods, but yours is not one of them. Do you see that stallion? His name is Uchai.” Bouba pointed at a broad brown horse in the pasture. “He’s a victor on any field. This summer he can fight for the independence of my city, or win the races of the Equirria festival. Either way, I do not own the losing horse.”

“Your iniquity and idolatry has forbidden you from being king.” İzmir pitied Bouba. Fires awaited men like him. “Godspoint will make you repent.”

“I would make an excellent king, but I don’t have the ambition.” Bouba waved his hand. He poured himself more wine. “I will not submit to tyranny. I want a free Halkis.”

“Godspoint is no tyrant. He is a loving Father that knows best.” İzmir set his cup on a redwood table. He crossed his arms and looked Bouba in the eye. “Obedience proves our love for Him.”

“Your god would have you live as a slave. Worse still is that he would have you be a slave to other men.” Bouba swallowed a gulp from his cup. “A Spire puts man no

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closer to god. No man owns earth or water, no man commands fire. Our worldview separates us.”

“What separates us is sin. You are enslaved by your passions. You are deceived by the lies of Muloch.” İzmir shook with unbridled rage. He lifted a finger at Bouba. “Be careful who you worship, you have only one life. Squander your soul at your own risk, for you shall pay with eternity. Those who disobey Him burn forever.”

“You are the most deluded man I have ever met. See yourself out. Give my regards to Nestor.” Guards appeared on either side of İzmir. Bouba turned to survey his stables. He poured out his wine ceremoniously. “It’s clear that I must ready my horses for war.”

ὄρη δὲ ὄρη

İzmir stepped over a lacerated man. A wagon burned in the mud. Horses lay bleeding along the road. His silk slippers were soaked. İzmir pulled his robe up with both hands. Nestor stood only a short distance away, but İzmir could not see a path that didn’t walk over a dead or dying soldier.

“Settlers will arrive within a few days to repopulate.” Nestor looked out over the battlefield. Broken bodies spread out in every direction. Nestor cleaned his sword. “I want the city renamed. Let us forget that Halkis ever existed.”

“How did you end the rebellion in Megara?” İzmir decided not to move.

“There was nothing to stop that city. Too many bloody ties to Korynthos. I promised their independence. The mainland is not as important as control of the seas.” Nestor chuckled to himself. “We can always recapture those lost cities later. With command of the sea we can strike where and when we want. The trick was getting the Caryaeans to go home. I bribed King Anax. For a mere twenty talents he turned for home.”

“True diplomacy! That afforded you the time to sail here!”

“Governing is about knowing which battles to fight. If only the Assembly was wise enough to govern itself. The Assembly spends their time fighting one another. We are ruled by a greedy mob.” Nestor let out a sigh. His shoulders slumped slightly. “They are moved to action without forethought. They are quick to anger and wrath. Leadership requires cunning not rage.”

“Is anger not understandable?” İzmir thought anger was a sign of conviction.

“Anger is of no use. Only practical solutions matter. You cannot control through threats. You control through strength.” Nestor climbed onto the back of his horse. “The Assembly is fixated upon their past and their pride. But that problem plagues all cities.”

“Godspoint will guide us through these dark times.” İzmir looked up at the balding general. Nestor’s mind was elsewhere. He replied from his saddle in a whisper, more to himself than to İzmir.

“Only victory over Caryae can save democracy.”

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Chapter 5

KING ACT III

Mortal Coils

“The sum is also the source.”
A.B. Candle, *Discourses with Leontini*

Anax let his eyes roam the contours of the Oracle’s Temple. Columns ran along the western and eastern sides. Aoethian troops lounging in the courtyard grass. Zynthus was defiled by their presence. The smirk of the Spire Priest made Anax’s skin crawl. No faction in Aoethai was as despicable as the High Council of Pontiffs.

“I am İzmir, Pontifex of Zynthus.” The bald headed old man bowed slightly. Four soldiers took posts around them. “What brings a Caryaen King to my island?”

“This is not *your* island, no matter how many mercenaries you garrison here.” Anax kept a palm on his father’s hilt. He nodded toward the guards. “This island has always belonged to Vejovis. I am here to speak with His Lady.”

“For what purpose?” The wrinkled man reveled in his position. He smiled from ear to ear. The guards squared their shoulders to face Anax. “As overseer, I must know.”

“I was exiled unlawfully, and I seek her support. I did what was best for my city.” Anax let his hand fall from his sword. The guards did not relax. “The Ephors sought war. I sought peace. They branded me a traitor.”

“You’re trying to erase your guilt.” İzmir smiled. “No Oracle can help you.”

“I’m not here for the bile of a cult, zealot.” Anax shook his head. He crossed his arms defiantly. “If you think you know me... there’s much you don’t know. Silver could never buy my loyalty.”

“Some seek comforts beyond metal.” İzmir shrugged.

“Such a man does not stand before you.” Anax took a deep breath. He lowered his shoulders and spoke quieter. “Let a pilgrim pass.”

“Caryaens seem impervious to reason, but let’s make you a deal. Take an oath on your Caryaen honor. Inform me if the balance of power ever shifts in Rōdāüçé.” İzmir pointed toward the island’s dock. “Otherwise, find some other Oracle to pray to.”

“My mother used to say that Zynthus was the holiest of all the islands. You’ve made it a house of insult. I will agree to your terms only if you bring me to the Oracle now.” Anax walked between the guards toward the inner Temple hall. “My patience with you has evaporated.”

Anax walked into a circular audience hall within the Temple. He pleaded his case to the walls until he heard the gong. The gong’s echoes danced in amongst the curved walls. Anax sat down and waited in the silence. He smelled incense and oils. Four women’s voices shattered the silence. They spoke all at once in perfect harmony.

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“The scion of the demi-god, the blood of Lyceus, must be restored,” Anax held his breath. He exhaled and collapsed onto his back. A tear dropped from his cheek onto the stone. “...else Caryae should till their fields with silver ploughs.”

Anax left the island of Zynthus with his heart billowing in the wind. Messengers were sent before him to announce his return. The Senate could not deny the Oracle of Vejovis. Anax would finally be able to sleep next to his wife. He would finally be able to raise his son.

ὈΨΥΔΩΝΩ

Anax was immediately escorted from the Caryae harbor to the Acropolis. An enormous festival had overtaken Caryae. He was led to a dais and a throne. It had been centuries since a King had been received in such a manner. Anax had never seen anything like it. The smell of roasted boar filled the air.

Anax imagined his victorious father outside of Platya. King Archus discovered the enemy had prepared dinner. He ordered the meal be served to his quarters. His father had often referred to it as the most delicious meal of his life. Surrounded by the feast and dancers, Anax tasted his own victory.

Caryae’s best soldiers wrestled before the dais. The ring was surrounded by a roaring and drunken crowd. Behind Anax sat the Ephors and Senators. Nothing but hisses and whispers could be heard from them. He wondered where Damus was.

Anax saw his son Paulanias step into the ring. He had become a man during Anax’s exile. Opposite him in the ring was Agis II, Damus’ son. Agis lunged with the fury of a lion. Paulanias was quickly pinned. The crowd roared Agis’ name in jubilation. Agis raised his fists high in triumph.

“Welcome home King Anax,” Agis was the first combatant of the day who had addressed him. The boy had Damus’ square jaw. “My father always spoke well of you... even amongst those who hated hearing it.”

“Where is he? He should be beside me.” Anax waved his hand at the festivities. “No one man should be at the center of all this.”

“He is too ill to leave his bed.” Agis looked off toward Pichincha.

“I shall visit him at once.” Anax jumped out of the throne.

The Ephors were angry he was leaving. Anax ran to Damus’ house. He arrived out of breath. A slave opened the door and offered him water. Anax was led to a bedroom that smelled of decaying flesh. Damus was propped up on the bed with a dozen pillows.

“I told them Aoethai would not be so easy!” Damus coughed into a pillow. He was frail and sweating. “Those blind fools!”

Damus motioned and a slave brought water to his lips.

“I told them that this war would be passed down to our children...” Damus’ eyes were green oceans of sorrow. “I’ll rest easier knowing there will be two Kings again.”

“Too many of these Ephors have forgotten the Old Ways.”

“Our forefathers built the greatest country in the world... Success came from staying out of endless wars.” Damus coughed violently. The bed shook with him. “I like Nestor... he knows how to rule. But his empire will collapse... as they all do.”

ὄρη Δωδεκά

Anax sat in a Senate meeting. The doors were shut and barred. After the herald from Korcyra, the room had been enthralled in a bitter debate over what to do next. Anax remained silent. The first minutes of the debate comprised of empty political rhetoric.

“Korcyra’s democrats won the civil war! This is nothing short of disaster!”

“Only because the Korynthians are cowards!”

“Korynthians are skilled seaman.” Anax knew it would be difficult to rout them. “Were they outnumbered?”

“No. Korynthian ships won the battle. But they saw Aoethian ships on the horizon and retreated.” A senator with dark hair replied. Anax thought he could be the youngest man in the room. “They gave up their advantage, only to discover it was a force of only twenty ships.”

“The rebels slaughtered the oligarchs!” Shouted a well dressed senator hollered from the corner. “Blood runs in those streets, and our Korynthian allies have been greatly insulted!”

“The reason why we continue to struggle is simple... Heaven makes it clear!” The Ephor pointed at Anax. *The reason I was requested*, he sighed. “Anax was restored because he tampered with the Oracle! Each week brings worse news. Vejovis is punishing us because of him!”

“If you have charges, bring them!” Anax waited. The Ephors were humored by his anger. Their laughter set a fire in Anax’s chest. “Stop wasting everyone’s time! If you want to end our suffering then end the war!”

Scaling Oath Mountain

Chapter 6

PONTIFEX ACT III

Two Horsemen

“Greed is errant love.”
Tau 8-32, *Holy Doctrines*

Aoethai had turned into an open graveyard. İzmir stood on the balcony of Great Spire. The stench filled the air. He saw the Acropolis in the distance. The streets were littered with corpses. The plague had destroyed every custom and law. Organized funerals were rare.

“Godspoint is purifying Aoethai.” Pontifex Maximus Adamic turned away from the balcony. He walked gingerly, dragging his left foot. “Godspoint is giving them reason to fear Him.”

“I thought we had the favor of heaven...”

“Aoethai continues to support criminal anarchy. This is the result of their sins.” Adamic sat down in a cushioned chair. He rubbed his leg with both hands. “Godspoint does not reward the half-hearted.”

İzmir still couldn’t recognize Aoethai. When he had left for Zynthus it was untouchable. Seeing it in lawlessness terrified him. He heard wailing above the crashing waves. Another Aoethian was succumbing to a violent death.

“See how quickly men discard civil society? Look how they give up on Godspoint!” Adamic slumped back in his chair. “They turn on one another. They forsake themselves.”

“What would Godspoint have us do?”

“Caryae will not risk an assault while this infection persists. But once it has lifted they will reduce us to ash. We must end the war on favorable terms.” He grabbed a cinnamon cake and stuffed it in his mouth. “The vulgar act as though this day is all there is. They must fear the law again. We must bring order to them.”

One of Nestor’s personal guards was escorted into Adamic’s office. His eyes were filled with despair. He walked with sagging shoulders. The deacon escort left the room and shut the door behind him. Nestor’s guard gave out a sigh.

“Nestor is dead. The plague has taken him.”

İzmir had always thought of Nestor as invincible. If such a man could fall prey to the plague then none could be safe from it. İzmir thought, *what else can Godspoint take?*

“That man found a city of brick and left it covered in marble,” Adamic mused.

“An assemblyman told Nestor something similar.” The herald nodded and smiled. “Nestor replied that his proudest achievement was never hurting a fellow citizen.”

“He continued to visit his people, even with invaders burning the countryside. He was a just man.” Adamic pointed upward. İzmir’s eyelids fell in sudden anguish. “He followed the *Holy Decrees*. He will be rewarded in Heaven.”

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“Could it be a sign...” İzmir worried. “That heaven is with the Caryae?”

“Virtue in heaven is piety on Earth.” Adamic ignored İzmir. “The politics of democracy can only supply vulgarities. Aoethai must submit to the rule of Godspoint.”

The screams of the dying echoed in İzmir’s nightmares. For weeks he dreamt of being buried by dying peons. He would climb out of the decaying pile only to see a red sky above. Every day İzmir awoke from the licking flames of a burning world.

ὄρη Δωρυχίδος

The forsaken blight returned to Aoethai twice more. It killed a third of the population. More men died of the disease than during the whole war. İzmir sat in his usual seat near the floor of the Aoethian Assembly. The theatre was packed with factions talking amongst themselves. Everyone awaited the report.

The herald took the stage. The Assembly became quiet.

“Our fleet met a terrible storm. We ran aground on a peninsula near the island of Pylos. When the weather cleared the main force continued on. Assemblyman Demoseth was left behind with several ships in a fortified position. The enemy learned of our presence and launched a full offensive.” The herald held up his bandaged arm. He spoke slowly. “They garrisoned troops on Pylos. When the fleet returned they were trapped. Caryae is willing to negotiate a truce for them. I have brought their diplomat.”

“What have they offered?” A crooked old man yelled from the top row.

“They handed over their ships as a show of sincerity. We are to keep them for the length of the truce.” The herald turned and answered the question directly. It was customary to look a man in the eye when replying. “They only ask to bring food to their men while we deliberate.”

“Where is this Caryae?” Cleon stepped onto the stage. He threw his arms out and waved at the herald and diplomat. “And how are we to trust his word?”

“My word is enforced by my city. We do what we must for the safety of our citizens.” The diplomat walked the length of the stage and addressed the crowd. “We will have peace for them. The incursion into our lands could not be neglected... but we tire of this pointless war.”

“If Caryae would cede to Aoethai all of the territory we’ve lost, peace would be quickly concluded.” Cleon smiled with sinister intent. Caryae could never cede the territory of her allies.

“May we discuss terms privately?” The diplomat shifted uncomfortably. His eyes darted across the Assembly. Nothing could be kept secret in present company. Many laughed at the suggestion. İzmir did not envy the diplomat. Caryae were not used to being beggars.

“Nonsense! This is democracy!” Cleon howled, his voice echoed against the pillars. A few assemblymen shouted in support. “Terms are not handed to you by a tyrant. You deal with the city of Aoethai.”

“We cannot cede territory that we do not possess.” The diplomat gritted his teeth.

“Then negotiations have concluded.” The Assembly roared in support for Cleon. He clasped his hands together and shook his head with mock pity. “No truce granted.”

Cleon turned to the herald and pointed at him.

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“Tell Demoseth that this was all a ploy. They buy time with this.” Cleon smiled at the diplomat. The two men glared at one another across the stage. “We must press our advantage! Strike at the heart of Caryae!”

“What should I tell General Nikas?” The herald looked around in confusion.

“If he were any good he would have won already. Tell him to storm Pylos.” Cleon grinned at the stands. “I could take that island in twenty days.”

“Then why don’t you go?” A silver haired assemblyman stood up beside a pillar.

“Yes! Show us your military prowess!” A large man a few rows behind chuckled. “You have twenty days!”

Cleon had clearly not intended for that. He was stunned by the suggestion. İzmir saw him regain his composure and raise his arms into the air. Everyone cheered as he left the Assembly. Many stayed afterward to exchange bets on his return. *If Cleon returns successful*, İzmir thought, *he could be the next Nestor*. İzmir was certain that Cleon needed to be a friend of the Great Spire.

ὄψυδὼς

A decade of war was about to end. İzmir took the seat at the head of the long table without it being offered. To the left sat the Kings of Caryae and the diplomats from Korynthos, Valis and Meyara. The representative of Cadmeia sat at the other end of the table facing İzmir.

To the right were the Generals of Aoethai: Cleon, Nikas, Lamachus and Demoseth. Cleon had returned a victor. He had succeeded in forcing the surrender of Pylos. Caryaeans were known to prefer death over surrender. Aoethai was the first city to have captured them alive. Cleon was experiencing the heights of fame. No other man commanded such adoration.

“Firstly, we demand the protection of pilgrims traveling to temples.” King Anax began with his personal concerns. İzmir grinned. “Specifically the Oracle of Zynthus must be granted autonomy.”

“It would be best for Zynthus to rule her own affairs.” Nikas nodded with reassurance. İzmir remembered that he was a heathen as well. “No one can deny the rights of the faithful.”

What if they worship a false idol? İzmir wished he could interject, but he knew that it would not be welcome. He sat at the table only as a personal guest of Cleon. *That Oracle is a witch of Muloch.*

“Only if we have Semestra returned to us.” Cleon glared at the Kings across from him. They took offense to his disrespectful tone. “That city belongs to us.”

“Pylos must be ceded back.” King Anax spoke firmly. “All prisoners must be released.”

“You must likewise return our possessions.” Demoseth unrolled a map.

“Platya will not be returned!” The Cadmeian slammed his fist on the table. “That city is within our rightful sphere of influence!”

“As is Nisea within ours.” Cleon’s eyes narrowed in suspicion.

“You keep Nisea while they keep Platya.” King Agis pointed angrily at both sides. The young King pointed to the treaty. “Let’s get on with this so we can leave.”

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“I won’t sign anything that cedes my city’s only port to the Aoethians!” The Meyaran diplomat stood up. “My people are already starving due to their embargo!”

The Valisan representative stood up in solidarity. Everything grew tense. The Aoethian generals tried to hide their smiles. Anax and Agis tried to keep their composure. Anax frowned at his allies. İzmir loved watching them fight.

“Peace requires sacrifice!” Agis almost unsheathed his sword. His hand flexed over the hilt. “Caryae has shouldered that sacrifice for your protection! The league’s defense has cost us greatly.”

“The only reason we are here is because you worry about Phedias.” The Valisan diplomat crossed his arms. “To call yourselves our protectors is laughable.”

“We came here to make peace for our cities!” Anax lost his poise.

“I will no longer waste my time at this table.” The diplomat of Korynthos stood up and left the room. His counterparts from Meyara, Valis and Cadmeia followed. İzmir wondered if there would be a treaty at all.

“Many want us locked in war. In the interest of sustainable peace,” Anax shifted in his seat. He took a deep breath and put his palms down on the table. “Our two cities should sign a pact of mutual defense. It would discourage further instigation.”

“If we were attacked by Cadmeia...” Nikas was intrigued. “We could count on your support?”

“Yes... And if we-” Agis interrupted Anax. İzmir chuckled.

“If the slaves revolt, you help us crush them.” Agis hammered his fist on the table. Anax glared at his younger counterpart. “Or if Phedias invaded, Aoethai would be our ally.”

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Chapter 7

DEADFISH ACT I

Forced Migration

“No fairer a’ maiden, no sweeter a’ sea,
Those lords b’ craven, b’ I remember thee!”
~ Remoh, Bard of Mytilini

Belenas darted through the crowded street with grace. She dodged men carrying crates and women balancing baskets on their heads. Jublent was the port city of Mytilini. Every street was packed with people. Buildings were decorated with ribbons and banners. Belenas searched for her father in the square. All eyes were on the chief of the watch.

Her father stood beneath the marble statue of Lyceus Virotis. The god was posed as if tired from exhaustion, one arm over his head. The chief ordered everyone to prepare for a siege. She found her father standing in shock. Men around them started cursing.

Fear filled his eyes.

“Papa, what’s wrong?” Belenas tugged on his sleeve.

“Hush, child.” He grabbed her roughly. “We have to get our things!”

“Aren’t we going to the festival?” Belenas tried to hold her ground.

“It’s been cancelled.” He growled unapologetically. He led her toward the docks. Soldiers with bronze chest plates and helmets marched by. The harbor was frantic as men readied their ships. Belenas had never seen the fleet in action. Marines would only ever return with wild stories.

Beyond the walls was a sprawling shantytown. Her father wasted no time getting to their house along the shoreline. The roof was the remains of her father’s last boat. He ducked his head and entered through the curtain. He ordered her to pack food.

She was to leave all of her things.

“I only need my treasures!” She hugged her wooden box. She smiled to herself.

“No you don’t!” Her father slapped her hand, sending seashells and crystals onto the floor. “Act rightly! Pack the food.”

Belenas bolted out with tears burning in her eyes. At the shore she screamed until out of breath. She wiped her tears and saw fire on the water. Men screamed for help. Two of Jublent’s ships were listing to the side. Four others were engulfed in flames. Aoethian ships advanced into the harbor unopposed.

Her father stood next to her in the sand. He carried four sacks. Father grabbed her arm and pulled her toward the walls. Belenas looked over her shoulder at the advancing ships. Fishing boats lay abandoned on the shore. Merchants ran toward the city.

“We need to be behind the walls when those men land.” He was worried.

“Would Aoethians hurt us?” Belenas’ father had said Aoethians fought with honor. Her father had fought for them. He said that the men he served with followed Godspoint. They were known as Spire Swords. Their order was highly respected.

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“They are at war.” Father spoke under his breath. “Men at war do as they please.”

Belenas and her father were some of the last to enter the city before the gates were sealed. The streets were crowded with people shoulder to shoulder. Archers stood on the battlements and spearmen huddled near the gates. Children cried. Belenas watched.

ὄψυχαὶ ψυχαὶ

Belenas was wedged between a doorframe and her father. The alley was packed with filthy bodies. No one could stretch their legs. Most had been farmers and fishermen before the siege. Belenas recognized some of the men from hill sermons. They urged her father intensely. He was disagreeing as usual.

“I will not take up arms against Aoethai.” He shook his head firmly.

“The Caryaen expects everyone to fight!” Aristos whined from the other side of the alley. “Even elders!”

“Others will refuse.” Decos cursed and pulled his long brown hair back.

“This is why we need a democracy!” Phileo, the youngest, spoke with passion.

“Every government is beholden to coin, boy!” Aristos laughed. He pointed eastward. “No one votes with empty hands! The old alliance is dead. Aoethai has become a tyrannical empire!”

“I don’t care whose fault it is.” Father looked at Belenas. He crossed his arms and leaned back against the wall. “My concern is getting my daughter to safety. Fighting against a professional siege will not accomplish that.”

“You care nothing for your country?” Aristos’ eyes grew suspicious.

“My country is the kingdom of Godspoint.” Father raised his arms to the sky. He glared at Aristos. “My only Lord is Him.”

Belenas saw three guards pull up to the alley in a wagon full of armor and spears. She leapt up to get a closer look. She lost her view when the men stood up. She saw General Salaethus, the Caryaen, peering into the crowd. He was calculating the caliber of soldiers available. He frowned with fists on his hips. He was not impressed.

“Alright men listen to me! The food reserves have run out. We cannot wait for the arrival of my brethren.” Salaethus seemed comfortable speaking to men on battlefields. He made eye contact with everyone he could. “We can break free! Your loved ones depend on our success!”

A bronze chest plate and spear were issued to Belenas’ father. Other men received a spear and shield. Her father handed her the spear. She held it in reverence. The spear was heavy. There was power in its weight. Her heart raced.

“Why risk my life for men who never risked anything for me? I will only defend a city which feeds my child.” Father yelled. The alley grew quiet. The General was stunned. Father pointed out toward the wall. “Out there is a professional army. In here are farmers and fishermen. I will not throw my life away.”

“There is nothing more glorious than dying for your city!” Three veins popped out of the Caryaen’s forehead. “You’re a coward!”

“I was a Spire Sword for thirteen years.” There was deep pride in his voice. “But I will not risk my daughter’s life.”

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“Never trust a zealot! Those who speak sedition will pay dearly!” The General turned to the crowd. “This is war! Your children will be raped and burned if they take this city!”

“Not if we surrender the city to the Aoethians.” Decos nodded toward father in respect. “It’s the greed of our leaders that has brought us here.”

Salaethus held his fists tightly at his side. His nostrils flared as his eyes drifted over the spears he just handed out. He saw Belenas and shook his head. Belenas slowly turned the tip of her spear toward him. *One day men like you will fear me.*

“Surrender would be suicide.” Salaethus spit toward father.

“We all die,” Father shrugged as if he pulled up empty nets. He looked up into the sky with a smug smile. “Godspoint grants me everlasting life.”

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Belenas was excited to have stolen leftovers in her pocket. Before the siege she had never spent so much time in the city. Instead of pulling up nets all day she hunted for scraps in the streets. Her father never asked where she found the morsels, but she felt his judgment. She thought of the proverb, *take from none, give to all.*

“All the men in the city are to be put to death!” A herald ran past repeating himself as loud as he could. Belenas felt her heart stop. She sprinted through the traffic. Jublent had surrendered. The siege had continued, only with Aoethian soldiers inside the walls too. Father had said that messengers were sent to the Assembly.

Father had already heard the heralds. He stared into the blue sky motionless. The women and children were to be enslaved. Belenas couldn’t understand what that meant. She begged her father to explain what was happening.

“No! Wait! I was there!” Another herald ran up to the growing crowd. “A second edict was read. The Assembly changed their mind! They sent a fast ship with orders to belay the first decree! The city is to be spared!”

“Godspoint be praised!” Father said finally, weeping into his hands.

Belenas had never seen him cry.

When they returned home there was nothing but ashes. Belenas had lost the place of her only memory of mother. They had been walking hand in hand between the houses, singing a song. An old man cursed at them. Mother had yelled back, “The sun is shining and so should you!”

Looking at the burnt remains of her home, Belenas smiled at mother’s memory. She looked up. The sun was shining. The sky was clear. It would be a good day for fishing if they had a boat. An Aoethian soldier walked up from the beach.

“This land belongs to Aoethai. Pay rent or move on.”

“We have nothing to pay with.” Father threw his arms toward the torn down walls. The soldier smirked. “We were stuck in the city!”

“Then fate has already decided it.” The soldier rested his spear against his shoulder. He tapped his thumb on the grip. “You will move on.”

“Godspoint rules the rest.” Father started to ignore the soldier. He spun on his heel and smiled at Belenas. Father took her hand and walked back toward the harbor. “What do we say when a wave takes us?”

“Fix what you can.” Belenas melted when he smiled. She sang her mother’s song.

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Chapter 8

KING ACT IV

Wartorn Flesh

“Ink flows, paper changes.”
A.B. Candle, *Scribe of the Sea*

Parrhesia was lush terrain. The valley was filled with green trees. Charcoal mountains dominated the horizon to the southeast. The Alpheus River was a ribbon of bright blue, the twin cities of Psario and Murvia on either side. A new fortress stood across the river outside Murvia. An army of Caryaeans stood behind Anax in the wheat fields facing Psario.

“Mantineans and their Phedian allies quickly defeated us.” Zacharo, the Parrhesian, joined Anax eagerly. He was an ally from the ruling oligarchs of Psario. “They declared that both cities would become democracies! Then they built that ugly bastion to attack Caryae.”

Anax inspected the fortifications as best he could from the distance. It was a square shape with towers at each corner. It easily resembled the long walls of Phedias. He saw nothing special about the defenses. He saw sentries but could not judge their number.

“How many men are garrisoned there?” Anax eyed the Parrhesian with care.

“Six hundred in the bastion. Their main force remains in Psario.” Zacharo pointed north. His voice was full of worry. “They will try to liberate your slaves next.”

Psario sat at the intersection of several major roads. The fortress threatened Elaeum. Despite being a condition of peace, Aoethai had not returned the island of Pylos. Slave patrols reported that many escapees were joining the garrison there. Caryae could be forced to fight a war on every side.

“Mantineia needs to be taught a lesson. They will not expand, surely not at the expense of our league members. That fortress needs to be isolated so it can be starved.” Anax nodded at the fortress and pointed at Psario. “We will take Psario and block their supply. Everyone submits for the want of food.”

“Like your brethren on Pylos?” Zacharo’s eyes filled with fear under Anax’s glare. Zacharo cringed and lowered his head. “I am not versed in war. How do you expect to take my city when the enemy holds the high ground?”

“An enemy who thinks he has the upper hand is all the easier to defeat.” Anax looked back to see the bridge they had passed earlier. With a hand signal he ordered the army to prepare fortifications. “Showing fear is the first step in defeat.”

“I imagine that our enemy quakes in their boots seeing a Caryaean army.” Zacharo laughed nervously, throwing a glance back at his men on the left wing.

“I would love for fear to seize their hearts, but I aim to seize their minds.” Anax saw the Mantineans encamped on a hill. They lined the road leading back to their homeland. “Your enemy should always think as you want them to think.”

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The army began to entrench in the field.

Anax called his captains as his flag and tent were raised.

“Let’s leave them on their useless hill.” Anax had their attention but not their faith. “Third Company will dig a trench on the forward line and along our flank opposite the river. Make it deep and fill it with flammable materials.”

“Why waste time on a trench?” Captain Miltiades crossed his arms.

“These orders must remain secret. First and second Companies will assemble siege ladders under tents to remain unseen. Have them rest before sunset.” Anax jabbed a thumb over his shoulder. “At nightfall we cross the river. We sneak up to the fortress. We need them to think we plan to stay.”

“Won’t they overrun us here?” The youngest Captain objected.

“At daybreak set fire to the encampment. Make it seem accidental. Start near the cooking fires. Make the men run about anxiously.” Anax saw Miltiades nod but the others were not convinced. “When they advance set fire to the trenches. Then fall back to the bridge to defend our escape.”

The captains left in silence, but they would comply with their orders. As their King, his command could not be questioned. Caryaens would never want to die with dishonor.

The night march reminded Anax of the Crypteia. Every man in the phalanx had spent time killing in the dark. They arrived just before sunrise. The sentries walked the walls lazily. A cool breeze rustled the leaves above Anax.

Anax had sent men to the eastern side of the fortress with instructions to begin clashing their swords and shields at first light. Anax led the larger force through the trees to the opposite end. There they waited for dawn.

The sky turned orange. Their encampment across the river became engulfed in flames. Anax heard shouts and clanging. The sentry looked out into the trees. He saw nothing and turned his back. Anax gave the signal to lift the ladders. The guards along the wall ran toward the commotion. Caryaens were at the top before the sentries noticed.

Anax pulled his shield off his back and fastened it to his forearm. He unsheathed his father’s sword and charged the nearest spearman. The wall was soon under Caryaen control. In the distance the enemy army was splitting up. The dissolution was chaotic and unintended.

“Surrender your arms!” Anax held his sword in the air. The remaining Phedians held the courtyard below. They had their backs to one another. Caryaens surrounded them but did not advance. “Tear down this fortress or be put to death! Comply with our law and you may yet live to see your family!”

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“I would not question the Ephors if I had lost in battle. Instead I would live the rest of my life in shame. I would seek any remedy to regain my honor.” Agis shook his fists in anger. He punched the table and sent a rolled map onto the ground. “My father said open battle was the last resort. Our soldiers are not rags to be thrown away.”

“Courage is always required to do the right thing. You did what you thought was best for your city.” Anax picked up the map and unrolled it on the table. “The Ephors fear

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the rising power of Mantinea and their alliance with the Phedians. They seek a scapegoat. We serve that purpose for them.”

“Why burden me with their regrets? What king has ever had to answer to an appointed war council?” Agis threw his hands up. “I can’t leave Caryae without a leash! Tell me what kind of King is that?”

“Be thankful you may return. Exile is the worst of all punishments. Count yourself fortunate.” Anax looked down at his boots. “My son treats me like a foreigner. My wife acts as if I’m a leaper. Even after my restoration, I have lost everything.”

“You chose peace over war.” Agis spit onto the ground. “Does a good king go to war to silence his critics or his enemies?”

“An enemy can only be silenced with a sword.” Anax pointed to Psario on the unrolled map. “A critic can only be silenced in your mind.”

“I would love to take a sword to a few Ephors...” Agis spoke through gritted teeth. “They are the bane of our constitution.”

“They serve their purposes; our laws are what made our city great.” Anax looked out the tent at the massive army assembling. He recognized few faces. There was a new generation of men fighting. “We may not always understand, but we must never disrespect Caryae. Raise your sword against one Ephor and you’ll find four others ready to hang you.”

“You would let a critic speak ill into every ear?” Agis stood up angrily. He tossed the map onto the ground. “Even as they make you unpopular?”

“Popularity is a fickle investment. Men grow popular with promises they do not intend to keep or else cannot deliver.” Anax poured himself another cup of wine. He took a quiet sip before continuing. “My father sought popular support. His promises brought him betrayal.”

“How can men respect me when every decision must be approved?”

“They respect you because you fight with them. They fight for their country.” Anax pulled the tent door open again. He motioned to the men with his wine glass. “There is no greater honor. Remind them what they fight for.”

“What of the Tegeans?” Agis touched his helmet on the table. He sighed heavily. “Will they call us as liberators or invaders?”

“Stop wasting time on what others think. Stop weighing your shadow.” Anax picked up the map off the ground. He set it on the desk and held his finger above the valley they were both born in. “Your home is in danger. The road to Caryae runs through Tegea. Stabilize Tegea and your people will welcome you home as a hero.”

ὄρη Δωκεῖο

Winter had once again taken hold of the Caryae valley. Snow swirled in the biting wind. Anax shivered within several layers of fur. Agis’ army was slowly returning from their campaign against Phedias. Anax wanted to be the first to meet them. Spearmen walked in single file, many carrying wounded.

Agis had won a decisive victory in the fields outside of Mantinea. The victory had resulted in Caryean allies taking over Phedias. The oligarchs in the city held power for only a few weeks before a counter revolution replaced them with a traditional Phedian democracy again. Agis had been sent to Phedias to put the oligarchs back in power.

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The eyes of Agis were weary and full of frustration.

“I tore down their long walls but I could not restore our allies. The populace insists on keeping their institutional insanity.” Agis shrugged but walked with a slight limp. “They’ll destroy themselves with democracy. Without an army at least they can’t export their madness.”

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Chapter 9

MONK ACT I

Deny Departure

“All things begin, all things end.”
~ Tablet of Time

Dark clouds lurked above the mangrove trees. Iota remembered his Shotozen tenets. *Everything begins and ends with a bow.* He stepped in front of his meditating Master and bowed. “It is time for me to leave the Hidden Temple. *The heart must be set free.* Thank you for everything, Master Ardal.”

“What do you search for?” Master Ardal continued to meditate.

“The last book Tica brought was the *History of the Western Seas*. On every island there are tales of a dragon in slumber under the sea. I believe they all speak of the same dragon. The Ancients learned many things from it. My legacy will be to find it.”

“You will not find what you seek. Legacy is fleeting. Ancients are silent. Dragons are dangerous.” Master Ardal shook his head firmly, keeping his eyes closed. “*Everyday living in Shotozen will uncover the subtle secrets.*”

“This is your life, Master. You had a Known Name before coming here. I am eternally thankful for your teachings. Iota put his hands together and knelt. I seek to live by them. But it is time that I find my place in the world.”

“You are searching a banana tree for a sword.” Master Ardal stopped meditating. He looked Iota in the eye. “The world does not hold what you seek. *Before trying to know others, first know yourself.*”

“I have spent my whole life in this Temple’s shadow. I have reread the Ancient texts. I have meditated long on my decision. My heart has been set.” Iota had planned his entire journey. “I will climb Mount Chimborazo and speak to the Learned Ones. I will visit the Great Monastery of Athos. I will see the Dragon’s Spine of the Ancients.”

The Master smiled but remained silent.

“I don’t belong here. This is the architecture of the Gods,” Iota waved his arm about the Temple, “and you are the wisdom of Shotozen. There must be some place in Rōdāüćé where I am meant to be.”

“If you think that the world is where you will find yourself, then you will forever search in vain.” Ardal sighed. He stood up and put both hands on Iota’s shoulders. “If you must leave, remember *when you step beyond your own gate, you face a million foes.*”

“I will return. Perhaps what I find may restore your faith in the world.” Iota looked down at Temple steps. “I know that your time in the jungle kingdoms tore down your hope. I know that Hauscar betrayed your trust. I want to bring you proof that men can live in a society based upon the Laws.”

“Do not take up this journey with that as your motive! I am no longer concerned with the limitations of human society.” Ardal’s eyes became balls of remorse. “I await

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proof that even one man may live rightly. It's not enough to know the Laws. One must first know the deepest Compassion."

"I wish to live rightly, Master." Iota looked up defensively.

Master Ardal searched Iota's eyes. "Then do not kill."

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The most reliable travel through the jungle was along the Pastaza River. At the foot of the mountains there was the gem of the jungle. From Esmeraldas the road would lead Iota into the mountains. First he needed a boat to take him upriver.

Iota stepped into the village of his birth. He had come to terms with the isolationism of the people. He wore his monk's habit and walked patiently toward the river. A rotting dock had a handful of boats tied and anchored. Iota saw a dozen canoes beached on the shore.

Only one boat had a tall mast and a folded sail. Iota stood by it, admiring the diligently maintained craft. Although it may have been oldest of the jangadas, it was in the best shape. Iota was thought of the tenet *calamity springs from carelessness*. This fisherman was a smart one.

"You have an unhealthy interest in my boat, foreigner." Iota spun to see a man with hawkish eyes holding a rusty knife. The man stood between Iota and the shore. His eyes were lit with fiery hate.

Iota bowed. "I need passage upriver to the town of Esmeraldas."

"I'm no ferryman, boy! You won't find anyone here who is. You best be off to where you came from." He waved off toward the jungle. "You look like you're from Land's End. Foreigners have only caused us trouble."

"I'm no foreigner. I was born here. I grew up in this jungle."

"Wait. You're the bastard boy..." The man looked at Iota's habit a second time. "Tica took you to that lunatic!"

"You were a friend of Tica?" Iota smiled widely.

"She married my brother. Never gave him a healthy son." he snarled. He spit into the muddy water. "That's probably what killed him. A man needs sons."

"She always regretted that... Fate was cruel to her." Iota shook his head, remembering Ardal returning from Tica's funeral. Master Ardal had returned angry, but silent. "I miss her very much. I hope she is smiling down on me."

Master had fasted and meditated for eight days before speaking. Iota had never seen him so upset. He found it was best to leave his Master to it. After a particularly violent storm, he finally spoke, with Iota intently listening.

"The shamans took full advantage of the situation. They framed Tica's life with their own perspective." Ardal had spoken calmly, but Iota heard the anger. "They claim Spirits took her children for her 'sinful dissent.' Few rise against such peer pressure. Tica alone overcame her fears."

"I've never missed anyone less." The fisherman spit again. He had heard Tica's life told in a different way. The man shook his head in solemn disapproval. "Where are you going?"

"I'm embarking on a pilgrimage. Tica and I always talked of traveling the world." Iota smiled at the waves against the shore. "First I must get to Esmeraldas."

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“Why waste a good fishing day to ferry you up river?!” The fisherman laughed bitterly. “How much are you willing to pay?”

“I have only my gratitude and respect to offer you sir.” Iota motioned toward the boat. “Unless you have use for a strong back or a weak mind, I offer both. I can pay through labor; I just have nothing to trade with.”

“This is a test. The shamans always talk of the dead testing us. They say if we fail the dead... they haunt us for the rest of our lives.” The fisherman’s eyes lit up in revelation. He looked at Iota angrily. “If I don’t bring you to Esmeraldas... Tica will haunt me until my last breath.”

The fisherman quickly fetched his two sons. They readied the boat without a word spoken between them. The two boys were not much younger than Iota. The older was a peer. Both kept an eye on Iota while they untied rope.

The fisherman pointed to the front of the boat and there Iota knelt. The boys rowed their oars with timed precision. Wind filled the sail. White swirling waves crashed across the bow and water rolled across the deck. Iota remained on his knees. He leaned with the boat.

“So you lived in the Forbidden Temple?” the younger son chirped from his oar.

“Shut your mouth!” the father hollered.

“Father, please! Let him tell us what it’s like to grow up with a crazy man!” The older son bemoaned. “Did Spirits ever visit you?”

“You’ll swim home if you don’t shut up *right now*.” The father’s voice was full of venom. He adjusted the sails again urgently. “Helping this whore’s curse doesn’t change the rules of my boat. Stay silent or I’ll make you silent.”

Iota decided to meditate. Iota regulated his breath as waves crashed over his chest. The boat bucked and lurched. The fisherman would occasionally swear to himself. When Iota opened his eyes the river had narrowed. The boys had remained silent, but not happy. The younger had dried tears on his cheeks. The older avoided eye contact.

Dense trees spilled over the edge of the water. Branches hung with leaves in the water. Flocks of birds sat amongst the branches squawking and flapping. On the northern shore Iota saw a simple dirt path running along the bank. The boys jumped out and quickly beached the jangada.

“Now get off my boat.” The old fisherman lowered a hateful glare at Iota. “Take Tica’s ghost with you!”

“Thank you for your help.” Iota did as commanded. He turned and gave them a respectful bow. Iota smiled and made eye contact with the boys. “I would not have made it this far without the help of your family.”

“It wasn’t my family that helped you, bastard.” The fisherman stepped off his boat and put his face up to Iota’s. “You’re cursed. We want nothing of you. Leave and never return.”

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Esmeraldas stood in the distance beyond a bend in the river. Iota could see torches through the rain. The rain melded earth and river together. The road vanished under pools of mud. The horizon was dominated by dark clouds. Lighting flashed in the distance.

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Iota passed thatched huts and tilled soil. Most of the huts were silent and cold. Iota hoped that the lifelessness was due to the downpour. He saw a man out in a small field. He was very old. The elder didn't notice him on the road. He stood absently staring at his mud caked feet.

"My name is Iota," he bowed to the old man. "What do you grow?"

"Bananas, for the merchants," the old man answered sleepily. His eyes sparked to life and he recognized the rain. "My name is Atoch! Please come into my home! Your arrival calls for a celebration!"

The man hobbled to a thatched hut behind the banana trees. It was one dark room, but Iota welcomed the shelter. They were both soaked. A stone fire pit sat in the center of the room. To one side was a pile of pillows and several straw dolls. In the opposite corner were pelts and a tall walking stick. The old man dropped himself into a well worn rocking chair in front of the fire pit.

"Have a seat in my son's chair... he won't mind." Atoch smiled to himself, "He's a good boy. He'd give you his last shirt."

Iota sat down gratefully. His feet burned so he rubbed them against the dirt floor. He brought his foot up on his knee and itched it with both hands. The old man chuckled to himself and hobbled over to look at Iota's foot.

"You've got rootworm, my friend." Atoch made his way to the other side of the room. "Sinchi used to get them all the time. I know how to make an herbal tea that will get rid of it."

"Thank you, sir..." Iota continued to itch his foot.

"Stop itching." Atoch coughed. "It wants to be itched."

Iota began to meditate. The burning from his feet made it difficult to stay focused.

"Do you know how to make a fire, boy?" Atoch was searching a wooden chest.

"Yes!" Iota jumped at the opportunity to be put to use. He looked for the flint.

The old man laughed from his belly until he coughed.

"My goodness you and Sinchi would have gotten along well." Holding his mortar and pestle he searched for something else. "So eager to help, you would've been fast friends."

"Where is he?" Iota asked.

"They are with the Vejovis Priests. On the other side of the river..." Atoch's eyes glossed over. He began to crush herbs absently. He sounded detached from the memory. "My daughter... Illarya... came home with bumps on her forehead. They said she had Variola and had to be taken. Otherwise she would infect the town."

Iota remained silent. He tried to start the fire with a rock in his stomach.

"Illarya refused to go. She climbed up a tree and I couldn't get through to her. Sinchi was able to talk her down. He didn't have any bumps, but he demanded to go with his little sister." The man smiled proudly. "I remember Illarya wore a purple bow in her hair. Sinchi wore his favorite belt. They are getting better across the river."

"I hope they return healthy soon." Iota got the fire going. "No one would wish that upon children."

"A long time ago, I thought the same. We all learn the truth. My grandfather used to say there was nothing new about evil, just new men being evil." The old man shook his head sadly. "The men from the mountains are without souls. When I was little, the tribes

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“They helped build it. All you have brought is insult.”

Iota decided to end the conversation. He turned to the graves and began to untie the muddy bow. Master Ardal took Iota into the deep jungle after Tica died. When asked why, Ardal had replied, “We are going to build a grave for Tica.”

“But we don’t have her body.” Iota remembered his confusion.

“A grave is not for the body of the dead,” Master had kept walking. He spoke over his shoulder. “It is for the closure of the living.”

For Tica they built a wooden box atop a fire pit. They each said goodbye in silence. Then Master set the box a flame. They meditated at the ashes until the smoke stopped. Iota remembered thanking Tica for everything. Atoch had never had the chance to say goodbye in his own way.

Iota lifted the purple bow and reached for the belt. The priest moved to stop him.

“You’ll desecrate these graves!” He yelled frantically.

“I am going to give a man the opportunity to find closure.” Iota held onto the bow and belt tightly. “To stop me you will need a hundred armed men. Let me do this, and I will remain peaceful.”

The priest let go. Iota brought the bow and the belt to Atoch’s hut. Iota could not find him so he built a rough fire pit from the stones along the river. He found a piece of chopped wood and placed it in the center. He gently placed the bow and belt on the wood and walked away.

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Chapter 10

DEADFISH ACT II

Throwing Spears

“Headaches start with decisions.”
King Leo, *Royal Summersands*

Belenas awoke from the nightmare. The sun warmed the dawn sky. Father was already awake. He set his knapsack inside the boat. *I overslept again.* She tied her hair up and found her sandals. The nightmare clung to her heart. She struggled breathing.

“The omen?” father grunted.

“I don’t know what it is...” Belenas still smelled heaps of rotting flesh. The dream plagued every night. It always started fishing with her father. It always ended pulling up nets of dead fish. “Why can’t I just sleep?”

“Ask Godspoint for guidance.” Father sounded worried. He handed her his copy of the *Holy Doctrines*. “Go speak with the Spire Priest.”

“I don’t want to.” She always felt uncomfortable in the Spire. People there were always disappointed in her for something. “I want to figure this out.”

“You should spend more time reading.” Belenas laughed and he glared at her. He continued with less patience in his voice. “Priests know the word.”

“I don’t want to speak to them.” Belenas dug her heel into the dirt floor.

“You will go to them now, while I go and work. Or else I will spend the daylight beating you for your disobedience.” Her father was agitated. His voice rose into a scream. “You are to make an offering to Godspoint! You will speak with a Spire Priest! Then you will read until I come home. Understood?”

Belenas decided not to answer him. She made her way into the city. *He talks to me like I’m a baby!* She entered the Spire unceremoniously. An acolyte handed her burning incense. She stared up at the statue of the Son. *What could a god do? Father’s faith brought him nothing.*

A Spire Priest stepped up to her. Belenas wished the incense would burn faster.

“What troubles you?” Belenas cringed at his raspy voice.

“Every night I dream of fishing with my father. Every night we pull up dead fish. It feels like we’ve been fishing forever.” She watched the smoke snaking upward. “When I wake I feel sick. I can’t think right.”

“In dreams, dead fish signifies a loss.” The bald man nodded energetically. “This makes sense, given your troubles.”

Belenas was stunned. The Spire Priest had a smug smile on his face. *Did father tell him about the food I stole during the siege?* Father had never spoken of it. She always thought he would use it against her but didn’t.

“Let’s discuss this in my office.” He started to shuffle down the hall.

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She put the incense in a holder and followed. She racked her mind trying to think. *What did I do?* Belenas spent her spare time with the other fishermen's children. She had never cheated in any of the games they played. The fights had never been her fault.

Up a spiral staircase on the second floor of the Spire was a hallway of offices. The Spire Priest went into the one at the end of the hall and sat behind a giant burgandy desk. He motioned for Belenas to take a chair. He put his hands together and sighed loudly. His wrinkled cheeks shook when he spoke.

"You have an unnatural desire. Godspoint speaks to you through these nightmares," he pointed at her. His dark brown eyes looked at her with distain. "My goddaughter admitted to me that you kissed her. You must repent for your sin."

"She's really nice." Belenas smiled reflexively. "I like her a lot."

"Godspoint made a man and a woman. He made women for men. You're risking eternal damnation!" He slammed his hands on the desk. Belenas leaned back in her chair. His voice became a roar. "You will not corrupt her! Find a husband and give him sons!"

"I wasn't made for a man." Belenas shook her head, with a thumb to her chest. "I'm made for me."

"Godspoint will punish your selfish nature." He turned away in disgust. He pointed to the Son hanging on the wall. "You have not accepted Him into your heart."

"What if I love her?!" Belenas screamed across at him. He was a man who was not accustomed to resistance. He looked insulted. "Is love selfish?!"

"Your dreams are telling you to end your sinful ways. Honor your father. Give him something to be proud of." He lowered a pitying stare at her. "Don't spend the rest of your life pulling up dead fish."

"My dreams are *my own*. I decide what they mean. Doing what you say – what father says – that's the opposite of what I want. I'll never be happy listening to you." Belenas stood up. The Spire Priest's eyes turned to slits. He breathed heavily. "I don't want to spend my life fishing. I don't want a husband to look after. I'm busy keeping myself out of trouble!"

"You have chosen a life of sin and death."

"I choose the rules. We're all dead in the end. Most deaths don't make any sense." Belenas got up and walked to the door. She stopped at the door and looked back. "No man – and no god – can save us from that. I'm not wasting time on either."

Belenas waited for father on the shoreline. The sun was high, the sky clear. The sea was the only place she could be free. Raider ships lived outside of the laws of religions and cities. Sailing where they wanted and taking what they could. Belenas was sure she could best them all.

"Well?" Her father grunted as they pulled the boat onto the beach.

"I'm leaving." She leaned in and gave her father a hug. "I'm joining one of the raider ships like the Drossen boys."

"Those boys were of age!" He grabbed her arms roughly. "You're too young!"

"I beat them at every game we ever played. They even attacked me together once! I beat them both without even trying." Belenas pulled herself free of his grasp. Standing further away, she shook her head at him. She started to walk away and yelled over her shoulder. "If they can survive so can I. Don't worry... I'll kill anyone that hurts me."

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Scaling Oath Mountain

Belenas loved the raider's life. She was one of thirty oarsmen aboard the *Rabid Boar*. After four years she proved as good as any of them. After raiding her first town, she was given her first gold coin. Minted in Aoethai, it had a caduceus on one side and the face of Rucrem on the other. She had earned many coins since, but only the first stayed in her pocket.

The ship sailed into a port she had never visited before. Once tied to the dock, the *Rabid Boar's* crew spilled into the streets. It was normal to be harassed both aboard and ashore. She paid little attention unless forced to. When they got physical so did Belenas. She would clean her dagger while his intestines spilled onto the floor.

Belenas spent her time ashore hunting a soft smile. A twinkle in the eye was the only thing that made her nervous. Belenas would exaggerate her exploits, often while embarrassingly intoxicated. Long hours of oaring gave her time to chew on dumb things she had said to pretty girls.

Gubal was at the edge of the world. The people wore bright colors. Belenas had never smelled some of the spices before. She guessed it would be best to stay with the crew. Isaac was one of three midshipmen aboard the *Rabid Boar*. They pushed their way into a crowded pub.

The midshipmen found a dimly lit table and claimed it. The senior midshipmen, Sham, sat across from Belenas. When they had their food and drinks in front of them, she seized the opportunity. She kicked Sham's leg to get his attention.

"How do I become a marine?" she yelled over the drunken clamor.

"The captain doesn't hire any cur carrying a bloodied dagger." Sham laughed around a mouth full of bread. "Marines are chosen from midshipmen. Midshipmen lead in battle. Who would want you as a leader?"

"I would." Isaac blurted out. The others leveled stunned faces. He shrugged and continued eating his soup. "What? She works harder than any of you!"

"You're so stupid you think the stars tell the future!" The senior midshipman threw a piece of bread onto his plate. Sham pointed at Belenas, he grimaced as though stomping out a bug. "You will never be a marine! Women shouldn't be allowed on a ship at all, let alone into battle. You wouldn't last your first shock."

"I'd last longer than you." She loved that he was losing his temper.

"Know your place!" a piece of meat flew out of his mouth.

"I do. I'm teaching you yours. Midshipmen teach oarsmen, so I just took your job. I think I'll keep it." She laughed to herself. His eyes glossed over as the others laughed. "You're not bright, and I wouldn't want you thinking I beat you unfairly. So we fight for it. No weapons. Winner is the third midshipmen. Loser finds a new ship."

"Who the hell are you to make decisions for the captain?" Sham threw his mug.

"Some men raise their voice because they fear the fight." Belenas held his gaze. She loosened her shoulder muscles. "The trouble is no one fears a coward."

"Shut your mouth woman!!" He tossed the table aside.

Belenas jumped up and punched him in the temple.

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Scaling Oath Mountain

Belenas sat alone under a star filled sky. She drank her ale with her feet in the sand. It was the first time she had been ashore since Gubal. The *Rabid Boar* was beached near the trees. A big man stumbled over holding a mug to his chest. Though three times her size, he had gentle green eyes.

"Mind if I join you? I miss the sea." He swayed in the wind. Belenas guessed that he could drink a barrel by himself. "I'd like to sit near it."

"Help yourself." Belenas motioned to the seats around the table. "I don't like being far from it either. Call me Deadfish."

"A name you gave yourself." He chuckled into his mug.

No one had ever responded that way. "Why do you say that?"

"If someone else called you that... you'd hate it." He fell into a chair.

Belenas considered it for a moment then nodded. "You're probably right."

"They call me Bumper," he set his mug on the table and leaned back. "I'm the first thing that hits the dock."

"Born without sea legs?" Belenas smiled.

"No... There's just so little time," Bumper laughed then sighed, "...and so many beautiful women."

"We share that worldly challenge," Belenas shrugged. "Don't waste time on me."

"No... that's not why I'm here. I'm hiding... from the one I love." He took two hardy gulps. He wiped his beard with a forearm. "To have a girl that classy, a man needs coin. I need a new port... she'll find me here."

"I'll never let a woman own me like that." Belenas shook her head.

"Oh! I promise you," Bumper smiled ear to ear. "I am sure of this one thing: love bites us all."

"Not me." Belenas was boasting. *Damn ale*. "There's a new girl in every port."

"At your age... I would've said something similar... Where are you off to? I can do anything that needs doing." Bumper smiled and pointed at Belenas. "I'd like to see the day you fall in love. It's gonna take you good."

"The last ship wasn't really ready for me. I'd like to find one that is." She sighed more than she meant to. "My friend Isaac said he'd leave with me. He's the best navigator I've ever known. Do you know of any good raider ships?"

"You're a raider?" Bumper's eyes went wide. "You're full of surprises!"

"I will die a raider." Belenas smiled. "You don't have to come with me."

"No. It's decided. I am." Bumper drained his mug. He stood and stumbled. "Where's this Isaac fellow? We need to find a ship that's leaving tomorrow."

"What's your hurry?" Belenas couldn't suppress her laugh.

"That woman loves me. That's the worst part. She wants me to work the mines. Me! A seadog buried underground!" He leaned against the table. He swallowed and checked the mug. His brown eyes filled with sorrow. "I won't do that to her. The sea has to be under my feet, or she will find me."

Scaling Oath Mountain

Chapter 11

MONK ACT II

Cold Anger

“Veuona, the light in every star,
Wears mindful ones as pearls.”
~ Cloud Valley Temple Inscription

Iota tried to keep his mind focused on the journey. Atoch’s grief was heavy on his shoulders. Esmeraldas lay behind him. The road snaked upward between cliffs and crags. Ash poured into the sky from the summit on his left.

The smoke covered the sun. Iota’s chest ached. Atoch’s tears were seared into his mind’s eye. *How many are dead because of greed?* The Vejovian priest had been evasive. His words were shrouded in secrets and pacts. *How could a holy man speak with contempt?*

Master Ardal would provide context. Ardal was able to measure what he saw. The road gave way to a highland plateau. A valley between mountain and volcano. There was a large silver Temple flying flags of a yellow sun. The streets appeared to be abandoned.

Beyond the town square he saw someone tilling. It was a middle aged woman with dark brown hair. She tended a garden near the road. She saw Iota and held the fence with shock. She clapped the dirt from her hands. She had the same calculating look of his Master.

“I see pain in your eyes, Rucremer,” she spoke gently.

Iota bowed. “My name is Iota. The sorrow I feel has no remedy.”

“You are meant to feel helpless. They want you to think there is no remedy. Our King rules by the threat of the sword. My name is Rumina, and this is the land of my mother.” The woman extended her arm back toward her wooden two story house. “Come inside, I have stew that should be ready.”

Iota eagerly followed. His last hot meal had been in Esmeraldas.

“Welcome to Pelileo. My mother’s family once ruled this valley.” Rumina beckoned him upstairs. The ground floor was made of stone and was open for storage. The second story had bedrooms and a large kitchen. “My grandmother led the Council for forty-two years. But then my aunt – the rightful heir to rule- married King Elvio.”

Rumina put a bowl of steaming vegetables on the table in front of Iota.

“Kaulito!” Rumina screamed toward the other end of the house. “Food! Now!”

A young boy shuffled into the room and eyed Iota suspiciously. He climbed into a chair. He looked malnourished and frail. He eyed his food but didn’t touch it. He watched his mother sit down. He frowned as she began to eat.

“When is papa coming home?” Rumina closed her eyes and let out a long sigh.

Mother glared at son. “If you don’t eat your food...”

“When is he coming back!?!” Kaulito slapped the bowl onto the floor.

Scaling Oath Mountain

“Get out of my kitchen!” Rumina stood up and pointed to the door. “Get out now! Starve yourself then!”

The boy ran from the table in tears. Rumina started to clean up.

“Where is his father?” Iota asked quietly, cautiously.

Rumina didn’t look up from sopping up the broth.

“Maybe the King’s dungeons... I may never know for sure.” She shook her head and let out a gasp. “They could work him to death in the Pillaro mines and I would never know.”

“What was his crime?” Iota's question made her flinch.

“Being true to his ancestors.” Tears flowed. She turned away and leaned on the stone oven. “Helping those around him.”

“How could that be a crime?” Iota stared into his stew.

Rumina turned around and pointed to Iota’s chest.

“Where did you get that calumet?” Iota was shocked by the cut of her words.

“It was a gift from my friend. It belonged to his son.” Iota remembered Atoch’s hardy laugh. “I promised him I would wear it to the sea. He said I could walk the entire distance safely. I wear it proudly.”

“That was once so.” She nodded but spoke with sadness. “While passing through the Golden Kingdom you must hide it. It is the symbol of the medicine men. Elvio ordered them all beheaded.”

“They killed healers?” Iota’s world spun without an axis.

“When my family ruled, it was custom for Matriarchs to wed medicine men. The mother would rule while the father healed the people.” Rumina wiped away tears and sat back down at the table. “They smashed every statue of Veuona. Elvio decreed that everyone must worship the Sun God. All else was heresy. Resistant Matriarchs were burned in the town square.”

“I’m sorry...” Iota muttered meekly.

“You must hide it. You are in danger if you display it. My husband was born to a family of medicine men. He kept his head by abandoning Veuona in public. He would help people when they would ask.” Rumina picked at splinters in the table as she spoke. Her eyes were aflame with rage. “Elvio rewards informers with bags of gold. If they sold my husband, they will easily sell you.”

“It would be wrong to forsake my promise.” Iota wanted to display the calumet. He refused to bow to fear. He tried to sooth Rumina’s worries. “I do not plan to linger in your country long. I will steer clear of the soldiers. I am en route to Mount Chimbarazo. I will be heading west thereafter.”

“Do you have gold for the tolls?” Rumina asked shaking her head in awe.

“Tolls?” Iota had not heard the word before.

“By the Goddess you’re dense. Elvio’s tolls are not the cutter’s share. It’s extortion.” Rumina’s eyes filled with pity. “Save yourself the heartache, boy. Go home.”

“I am thankful for your hospitality. I hope with all my heart that your husband is returned to you.” Iota looked Rumina in the eyes. “But I cannot turn back. I am tied to this path.”

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Scaling Oath Mountain

Avoiding soldiers became increasingly difficult. He walked with a brisk pace and did not stop when soldiers were near. His feet burned and bled. It became harder to breathe with each step. More than once he had slept under a thick roadside bush.

Iota arrived in the small hamlet just east of Embaitu. A creek ran between the hamlet and the city. It was clearly the meeting place of anyone who had no business further west. The tavern was loud and the temple was silent. Iota stood along the road, staring blankly into the distance.

It was clear he would need help. The capital was nestled in a mountain valley. The eastern wall of the city ran from one mountain to the next. There was one gate along the main road. Soldiers stood on the wall. Others checked wagons. There was no other way to Mount Chimborazo.

“You have luck in your favor!” A man with a tall bright yellow hat stepped into Iota’s view. He held a loaf of freshly baked bread. Iota’s stomach growled and the aroma made his mouth water. “I offer a sample of the sweetest, most delicious bread you have ever tasted! Cinnamon will change your life!”

At the man’s urging, Iota took a piece of the bread. It was warm and buttery.

“You see? Return home with this you could make a fortune! You’re here to make a name for yourself. To bring something back to the elders who doubted you! Today your stars have aligned!” The man extended his arms out, holding the bread carefully and bowed. “The name’s Dunkin, a humble spice merchant from Land’s End. My wagon was stolen from me. I’m being forced to liquidate wares. I’ll give you a price on 84 barrels of cinnamon that some men would kill for.”

“Sir,” Iota bowed, “I am Iota from the Hidden Temple. I appreciate your sample, but don’t have enough.”

“When the price is this low you can.” Dunkin patted Iota’s chest lightly.

“I have not one coin.” Iota bowed respectfully. “I have lived my whole life without ever counting one.”

“Then there is no use for you!” Dunkin turned and walked away briskly.

A golden carriage drawn by two powerful brown horses came to an abrupt halt. The dust had not settled when a voice called out from the carriage. The woman’s voice was warm but commanding.

“Is your name Iota?” The sun shined off the golden horse harnesses. The door was thrown open. “Come out of the sun, Iota. I offer you friendship and assistance.”

“Both are greatly welcomed.” Iota stepped up into the carriage. The driver was in motion before Iota could find his seat. Across from him sat a radiantly beautiful woman. She had dark brown skin and violet eyes. Her hair was tightly braided. Her dress had suns embroidered on the hems. “What do I owe such reception?”

“My dearest cousin sent me a runner and a sealed message.” The Queen smiled warmly. “My cousin said you would try to climb Mount Chimborazo without proper gear. You will find equipment on the seat beside you. They are from the King’s own stores, may they keep you safe.”

“Why are you helping me?” Wondered looking at the climbing tools.

“As a young girl, my mother made me sit through every meeting of the Valley Council. I would listen to them argue and fight for hours. They rarely arrived at solutions. But if the Oracle of Chimborazo spoke, all listened, even the Council could agree.” The Queen spoke with certainty. “That is the kind of unity my husband desires for us.”

Scaling Oath Mountain

Iota saw brick houses and street vendors through the windows. They had passed through the main gate of Embaitu. The driver maneuvered through crowded streets. The palace had been built along the north slope of Mount Chimborazo. Red flags with golden suns dominated the skyline.

“Unity has never been achieved through bloodshed.” Iota could not remain silent.

“The soldiers have perverted his message,” she snapped back. “Few credit him for the sustained peace he has brought. Raiders used to pillage the people of the valley.”

“Does he know that you help me?” Iota was still uneasy with her motives. What if he was being taken to the dungeons?

“The question you have for the Oracle will shake the world.”

“I doubt that very much. I have nothing to offer the world.” Iota looked to his feet. “I was not born to a house. I have neither country nor family.”

The Queen nodded knowingly.

“When I was born my mother took me to the Oracle,” her words were heavy with reverence. “The Oracle said that I would help a pilgrim reach the Mountain. For generations my family has protected travelers. Now I am the Queen, and I intend on continuing that tradition.”

“In the name of King Elvio, halt!” Iota saw a stone tower on the roadside. A red flag flapped in the wind. Two soldiers stood in the road holding spears. One put his spear in the driver’s face. “No one allowed up the mountain except the King himself!”

“I am your Queen! You will let me pass!”

“I don’ car’ who y’ are!” The other soldier shouted back drunkenly. “You ain’ th’ King so y’ don’ go up!”

“If I am forced to ride back to the castle, I assure you that the King will not be pleased!” The Queen’s voice rose steadily. “Elvio will throw you in the dungeons!”

“We aren’t garden guards. We take orders from the King alone. You’re just some witch bride he took to claim the eastern lands. Wait.” The soldier leaned over and saw Iota sitting behind the Queen. The soldier laughed. He gripped his spear closer to the point. “You’re transporting an infidel! Which means you’re guilty of heresy. The King’s punishment is death.”

The other soldier grabbed the driver and slammed him to the ground.

Iota jumped out of the opposite door and made his way around the backside. The soldier held the spear up to the Queen’s throat. His eyes were filled with lust and fury. The Queen’s protests fell upon deaf ears. Iota stepped out from behind the carriage.

“Let them go, I’m the one your King pays for.” Iota took three steps into open ground. The two spearmen became transfixed on him. “You’ve decided on violence. I’ve decided you’re in need of a lesson. Let’s settle this.”

“We’ll just kill you first,” Both soldiers converged on him with grins.

“Take the Queen to safety!” Iota shouted to the driver. The man raced to the reins. Iota caught the Queen’s eyes from the carriage door. She looked horrified by the turn of events. Iota bowed to her and to his advancing enemies.

Never strike first in Shotozen, he reminded himself.

Both soldiers stabbed their spears in unison. Iota dodged to the right. He spun and landed a kick to the first soldier’s temple. The soldier stumbled backward. The other swung wide and missed. He set his feet and lunged for Iota’s stomach. Iota grabbed the spear and pulled it out of his hands.

Scaling Oath Mountain

Iota spun the spear over his head three times and landed the blunt side on the soldier's jaw. Blood flew from his mouth and he hit the ground with a limp thud. Iota reset his feet and held the spear behind his back. Iota locked his eyes onto the remained enemy.

The first soldier squared up to Iota for another attack. He jumped forward lunging for Iota's heart. Iota side stepped and raised his spear high over the attack. He brought the blunt side down onto the soldier's head. The spearman dropped his weapon and fell face first into the rocks.

The golden carriage sped away down the road with a cloud of dust in its wake.
I hope the Queen has a good alibi, Iota thought.

Satisfied neither enemy seemed eager to stand again, Iota dropped the spear to the ground. He walked over to the road and picked up his mountain climbing equipment. Iota was eager to leave the country, but there was an Oracle he intended on visiting.

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The climb to the summit of Mount Chimborazo had been treacherous. The road and stone steps disappeared under snow and ice. Taking a full breath became a challenge. Iota had to use every hook and line the Queen had given him. Progress was slow. Iota pulled himself above the clouds and saw a plateau.

Towering over a sea of clouds was the true summit. The Observatory stood overlooking the island in the sky. It had been carved from a single stone just like the Hidden Temple. Iota crossed a narrow strait to reach the Observatory of the Oracle. Cliffs dropped into clouds on both sides.

Iota was welcomed at the door by a silent woman. She led him to the top floor where he met Sarkos, the Oracle's speaker. The cold gust of wind cut into Iota's skin and made his eyes water. The Observatory was seven stories tall. The ceiling revealed an open sky filled with brilliant stars. He looked down into the volcano's crater and saw snow.

"Why would the Ancients build so close to an active volcano?"

"Everything is symbolic. One day the volcano will erupt and shatter everything here. Where we stand will one day be part of a larger crater." He looked out onto the snow with Iota. "Everything succumbs to the Law. The Ancients did not ignore this as men today do. They embraced a fluid cosmos. Seeking permanence is acting in ignorance."

"Have the Ancients themselves not shown how permanence may be achieved?" Iota marveled at the knowledge it required to build such monuments. "To this day we have not mastered the principles which they employed. Kings build under their shadow. Is that not legacy?"

"Those achievements are admirable for their symbolic value alone. We have not name nor emblem which has survived the ages." Sarkos shrugged. He walked to the center of the room and looked up at the stars. "The eggshell becomes useless if the chick inside is dead. All material things pass and only a symbol can survive indefinitely."

"What do dragons represent?" Iota could see more stars than he knew existed.

Scaling Oath Mountain

“In mythology the dragon is often called upon to punish humanity. That’s an oversimplification of its original symbolism. The dragon represents the irrational mind and unflinching materialism.”

“What lessons did they learn from the dragon?”

“They only learned that a dragon has no regard for human life. Dragons obliterate unfounded notions of invincibility. They are interested in their own cravings. Each has its vice.”

“What will I find from the Dragon’s Spine in the western sea?”

“You will witness perverted history and symbols of control. You have a sharp mind. You have an eye for the truth.” Sarkos looked over Iota with curiosity. “Why waste time chasing fantasies? Stay here and learn the foundations of truth. Everything from one word.”

“I seek the thing itself, not a representation.”

“You are upon a foolish pursuit. The stars tell us about the world.” Sarkos sighed and put his hands on Iota’s shoulders. “Crystals, wands and swords control destiny. Coins and chalices have only brought sorrow to the world. What you seek is impossible!”

“You sound like my Master.” Iota cleared his mind.

“Who is your Master?” Sarkos peered deeply into Iota’s eyes, searching.

“Master Ardal of the Hidden Temple,” Iota felt someone creep up behind him.

“And where might I find this Hidden Temple?” The voice in Iota’s ear was sinister and perverse. Iota felt a cold blade on his neck.

“Is this your hospitality?” Iota put his hands up slowly.

“This is how we treat spies,” The man behind Iota breathed venomously. The blade was already drawing blood. “Now tell me what I need to know and I’ll let you live.”

“How long has the fabled Oracle been subject to the prejudices of one King?” Iota spoke to Sarkos, assuming the man with the knife could not be reasoned with.

“You broke the law on his road, not ours. I would have protected you if you would have chosen to stay.” Sarkos shrugged. “Clearly your not ready for Truth.”

“What did you tell the King when he came here?” Iota shouted angrily. Sarkos became uncomfortable. The assassin lifted the blade an inch off Iota’s neck.

“We told him that in order to unite his people he should give them one symbol. We told him that the strongest symbol was the sun.” Sarkos’s eyes wandered out into the night sky. “From that day forward he has been the King under the sun.”

“Did you also tell him to eradicate every other symbol?”

“His sins are his own. The Oracle has advised kings for centuries.” Sarkos scoffed at the assertion. “We answer questions from every corner of Rōdăuțé. We do not speak politics.”

“The man before me has no integrity.” Iota addressed the man with the knife at his throat. “I wonder if this swordsman has a free mind.”

The man sheathed the knife and stepped in front of Iota. He wore thick furs with a cowl over his face. He had two short swords and a dagger on his belt. He stood in an eager fighting stance. There was a bounce to his step. Iota bowed.

“You’ll find no sympathy here, you snake. I’m actually quite disappointed.” His hands fell off the hilts and to his side. “I’ve been up here months, and the first person I get to face doesn’t even bring a weapon?”

Scaling Oath Mountain

“I need no weapon.” Iota stood upright and relaxed.

“It just takes the sport of it out.” He pulled both swords from their sheaths. They gleamed in the moonlight, reminding Iota of another tenet. *Think of your opponent's hands and feet as swords.* “I won't enjoy it, but the King's law is clear. I'll find your Hidden Temple. Then I'll drop your Master's head at my King's feet.”

The assassin advanced methodically.

“What would death wash away?” Iota looked into the cowl. “What have you done to be banished here? How can blood buy you freedom?”

“The girl I always loved. We tried to run away.” he lowered his swords slightly. “Her father was powerful. He wanted me to hang. It was Elvio's grace that saved me.”

“It was him that sent you here!” Iota shook his head woefully. “Why is power more sacred than love?”

The assassin gave out a war cry and charged Iota. Putting the palms of his hands on the stone wall, Iota threw his legs over and out. He tried to hold onto the topmost stone, but the snow made his hand slip. He tumbled down the observatory's summit side wall. He fell into the dormant volcano crater. With a bruised backside, he sat up to see the swordsman in pursuit.

Iota backed into a snow bank. He crushed snow into a tight orb in his palm. The assassin advanced, now with only one short sword. When he got within striking distance, Iota threw the snow into his eyes. Iota's boot struck him square in the nose. Blood sprayed everywhere in the snow.

Iota saw hatred setting fire in the dark green eyes. The assassin stood up, lifting his sword again. He stepped out of the snow with his sword point at Iota's chest. Iota's heels hung off a sheer cliff. The swordsman lifted his weapon above his head.

“I'm throwing you off the mountain!” He spit blood onto Iota.

“Don't bother,” Iota looked over the edge. “Everybody calls me the Fool.”

Iota smiled and stepped off the edge.

Scaling Oath Mountain

Chapter 12

DEADFISH ACT III

Leaving Legacy

“Every day you awake to a new universe.”

A.B. Candle, *Insights of Ficus Religiosa*

Belenas, Bumper and Isaac became a tremendous team. In four moons they had improved everything aboard the *Holy Condor*. Isaac taught oarsmen how to be more efficient rowing. Bumper sang from his bench. Belenas led the marines into every battle.

She took pride in being the first to draw blood. Oarsmen would circle around her fights. They cheered for her until Belenas inevitably won. The crew had caused amended her nickname. They would refer to her as the Furious Deadfish.

Belenas was known by no other name. She enjoyed the secret. Only Bumper and Isaac knew her real name, and neither spoke it. Deadfish was the glory of battle. She wanted to embody that for her ship. She loved being their champion.

The captain was never to be found. Always absent when work or leadership was needed. He would drag himself aboard just before the ship set sail. He would walk directly to his cabin. The cabin sat on the quarterdeck. It had windows on all four sides and a door facing the oarsmen. Thick curtains covered the windows. The door was always locked.

The captain was never party to raids. Yet the spoils were brought to him before being divided. The crew accused him of having sticky fingers. Belenas guessed he kept out of sight in order to avoid addressing that perception.

Only Maldar, the senior midshipmen, was allowed in the captain’s cabin. Maldar was in charge of distributing pay. He never paid based upon merit. He would regularly only pay his friends. Belenas had not seen him in weeks. Isaac laughed, “He is on ‘sick leave.’” Bumper joked that he was probably at the bottom of a bottle. *Maldar has worse sins than drinking.*

When he returned from leave Maldar was no poorer. He walked the gangway with jingling pockets. He spoke in whispers, his eyes darted toward Isaac. He was busy spreading rumor and suspicion. Belenas had known men like Maldar. Trying to control men through deception, they only isolate themselves.

The *Holy Condor* slide into the sand and the crew jumped onto the beach. Belenas noticed she had Maldar’s undivided attention. There was vile excitement in his eyes. He could be a dangerous distraction. The crew sprinted toward the tree line. The unsuspecting village lay beyond.

Four other ships beached to her right. Belenas recognized slavers and tightened the grip on her spear. The captain had frequent dealings with monsters. The crew had orders to capture young children. Every slaver was worse than the last. Belenas leapt over a fallen tree.

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Bumper carried Orathaus onto the dock. Belenas helped secure the ship. When she looked up she saw an angel standing on the pier. Golden hair danced in the breeze. Her eyes were blue-green like summer shoals. She wore dirty work clothes, as though she had stepped out of a barn.

The woman instantly became concerned with the injured boy in Bumper's arms.

"I am a Known of Healing, I can help." She examined his wounds. "What has been done to him?"

Bumper threw a questioning glance over his shoulder. Belenas stepped up.

"Anything you can do to save the boy would put me in your debt." Her heart fluttered. She felt nervous. "I'm Belenas... this is Bumper. The boy's name is Orathaus. I'm captain of the *Holy Condor*."

"My name is Zaphenya Carrara." Belenas loved the sound of her silky voice. Zaphenya had the pronunciation of a royal. "Follow me, I have medicine."

Bumper grinned smugly but kept unusually silent.

Zaphenya led them up the hill beyond the docks. They followed a road past a tall white fence. Black and brown horses grazed in the afternoon sun. The house was enormous. Easily ten times the size of the shanty Belenas had grown up in.

"Your home is gorgeous..." Belenas saw marble statues of horses in the entryway. Decorative rugs hung on the walls. Belenas saw an oil painting of a garden. Every color of rose burst from the leaves.

"This is our horse ranch. Our home in the city is better furnished. My father is a merchant." Zaphenya pointed to a cabinet filled with flags. "He travels all over Rōdāüçé. He buys me a horse for every new country he trades with."

A year's worth of feed was worth more than everything Belenas had ever made. She saw trophies lining the north wall. Zaphenya had won first place in over a dozen chariot races. Belenas had never heard of a woman charioteer. Women weren't allowed to even attend races.

Bumper was told to place the boy on a bed. He left shortly thereafter, promising to make sure the *Condor* was ready for launch. Together they dressed his infections and feed him broth. Then Orathaus fell into a deep sleep. Zaphenya shut the door and walked up to Belenas with purpose in her stride.

"So..." The blue green eyes were critical and demanding, "are you a slaver?"

"On my mother's grave, no! Not at all," Belenas emphatically shook her head. "Chains are for men who fear other men. I fear no one. Slavers are monsters."

"How did he come to have those wounds?" Zaphenya was not convinced.

"I saved him from a galley we overtook."

"You're a raider..." Zaphenya's eyes narrowed. She crossed her arms. "You prey upon men like my father."

"I prey upon the *ships* that carry them." Belenas said defensively. "I kill only when I have to. I don't enslave."

"My father would not let you take his things." Zaphenya sounded worried.

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“If I ever met your father, I would give him my last coin.” Belenas pushed her first coin into Zaphenya’s palm. She focused on keeping her voice steady. “Thank you for helping the boy. Consider me in your debt.”

“I need no payment.” Zaphenya tried to give the coin back.

“I know. But that coin has been in my pocket for years... it was the first one I ever earned. I’ve had no reason to part with it until today.” Belenas nervously averted her gaze, but forced herself to look Zaphenya in the eye. “You are like no woman I’ve ever met. If that coin be unworthy of you, then the whole world’s wealth is worthless.”

“It’s in poor taste to flatter.” Zaphenya blushed and closed her fingers around the coin. “The boy needs time to heal. Don’t raiders leave port in haste?”

“I won’t be leaving him. I made a promise. My crew will understand. They are good men.” Belenas nodded to herself. She smiled at Zaphenya and felt butterflies. “I’m sure they need leave anyway. They love to explore new ports. I’ve never been to this island before...”

“This is Melosa, my dear,” Zaphenya turned and pointed to the city lights. “You must at very least see the statue of Myrtus. She’s the most beautiful woman ever carved.”

“I could use a tour guide...” Belenas heard stomping feet.

A little girl raced around the house screaming the whole way, “I’m home!”

Zaphenya laughed and knelt. They collided with intensity and hugged tenderly. Zaphenya grinned from ear to ear. “I missed you so much. How is father?”

“Why weren’t you at the dock!?” The girl slapped Zaphenya’s shoulder. “You promised! You said you’d meet me there! I was scared!”

“I’m sorry Melina... I knew you would be safe walking home.” Zaphenya held the girl at arms length. “I was there waiting for you, but someone needed my help.”

Melina abruptly saw Belenas.

“This is my baby sister. Meet Belenas,” Zaphenya stood up. “She’s my new friend. She brought the boy who was hurt.”

“What boy?” Worry filled Melina’s eyes. “What happened to him?”

“His name is Orathaus.” Zaphenya said proudly. “He was the prisoner of a sea monster, until Belenas saved him.”

“What sort of a name is Orathaus?” Melina grimaced.

“My father used to tell me old story... of a slave who became king.” Belenas knelt before Melina. “He was named Orathaus. They say he brought peace and justice to his people. He woke up as a slave. He fell asleep as a king.”

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Chapter 13

MONK ACT III

Eternal Bargain

“Words project change.”
~ Mantra of the Thucydians

Of all the islands Iota had visited, Melosa was the most beautiful. It was shaped like a horseshoe, with its main port nestled within the island’s natural bay. Iota sat in bright green grass. The hill overlooked the crystal clear waters. White houses fanned out around the harbor. Two ships lowered their sails as they coasted into the harbor.

The eight obelisks of the Dragon’s Spine were spread across seven islands. Iota worked on any ship that would take him. He had seen five Ancient monoliths on four different islands. All were without inscriptions or marking. The remaining three, called the Dragon’s tail, lay to the southwest. Iota had been avoiding his trip to the Monastery of Athos.

Chimborazo remained at the forefront of his mind. He had escaped with his life, but with a broken heart. On Oliaros and Ophiussa the obelisks were cracked and crumbling. Their legacy would inevitably succumb to the erosion of time.

Iota was lost in thought. An old man walked up the hill. Iota didn’t notice.

“Are you a man of justice? You look like a man with compassion. I am the Pontifex of Zynthus.” The man wore the robe of a Spire Priest. He was very old, holding a walking stick close to his body. He had a perfectly shaven head and face. “You must be a medicine man. I need your help to save Melosa from its own demise.”

Iota stood up and bowed with respect. “I am Iota. How can I help?”

“We must get to city hall. Aoethians have begun landing on the north shore. They mean to sack the city unless they submit.” Iota followed the Pontifex uphill toward the wall. “Aoethian delegates will propose peace. The Melosans must submit or die.”

ὄψυδωψυδὼ

Melosa was peaceful before the Aoethians arrived. The town square was a vortex of emotions. The crowd became increasingly restless. Guards stood at the doors of city hall. Iota was escorted inside with the Pontifex. They were instructed to stand along the wall. Thirty regal chairs faced two Aoethians in bronze armor. The Melosan Council looked down with contempt.

“Politicians bargain with their own ambitions in mind.” The Pontifex cursed into his walking stick. He leaned over and whispered into Iota’s ear. “These cowards don’t care for their people. They deal in private... hoping to secure something for themselves.”

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Iota had passed through Aoethai, on his way to the islands. Heralded as the most civilized city in Rōdāüçé, it was the hub of commerce. Aoethai was ruled by its citizens. Books referenced their historic victory against the Bronze Empire protecting their city.

The Bronze King rose an army from the sands of the south. He invaded with the largest army the world had ever known. City after city fell or surrendered. The Aoethians alone evacuated their city, taking to the sea for safety.

The invaders burned Aoethai to the ground. Iota remembered the bustling marketplace of Aoethai. That city served as proof that determination could overcome anything. It was one of the largest in the world. Embaitu was a village in comparison. Both shared a fondness for war.

Iota had left the mainland thinking of banana trees and Atoch.

“I would speak to the people of Melosa. Clearly, you don’t want them to hear me,” the taller Aoethian spoke and brought the hall to silence. “My name is Cleon. Today I offer peace. Will I be allowed to speak freely?”

“None shall object to a civil discourse.” The oldest councilmen spoke up from his chair. The Pontifex referred to him the Judge. “What seems inconsistent is the army at your back.”

“Ha! Don’t muse, face the truth!” Cleon took a proud step forward. “This is the only chance you have to save your city. I will not argue how you have hurt us. In return you must stop the lie of neutrality.” The Aoethian made eye contact with each of the councilmen. “When these matters are discussed by practical people... justice depends upon power. The strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must.”

“Why destroy a principle which is good for all men? Those who fall into danger deserve fair treatment,” The Judge used the bench to pull himself up in his seat. “This will affect you as much as anyone, since your own fall would be visited by terrible vengeance.”

“*If* our empire comes to an end, we don’t worry about what happens. We are not as frightened of being conquered by a power which rules over others, such as Caryae. It is worse to be attacked by your own subjects.” The Aoethian turned his back on the elders and eyed the guards standing at the doors. “It is for the good of our empire that we are here today. We do not want trouble bringing you under our domain. This can be mutually beneficial.”

“How could it be just as good for us to be slaves as for you to be our masters?”

“Save yourselves from disaster,” Cleon spoke frankly. “We would profit greater from your capitulation than from your destruction.”

“So you agree that we are neutral, that we are friends rather than enemies,” the Judge eyed his fellow councilmen, “allies to neither side in this age old war?”

“It’s not hostility that injures us. If we were considered equals our subjects would regard that as a sign of weakness,” Cleon’s lips twisted into a sick smile. “Whereas your hatred is a sign of our power.”

“So your subjects make no distinction between people unconnected to you and those who are your colonists?” The Judge shook his head in disbelief. “Do they also consider any country not their own to be rebels?”

“So far as right and wrong are concerned our people see no difference whatsoever.” Cleon sighed. He was growing tired of the debate. He looked at the Judge.

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“By conquering you we not only increase our size but also our security. We rule the sea and you are islanders. Melosa is important to our interests.”

“Is it not certain that you would make enemies of all neutral cities?” The Judge waved his hands in all directions. “They would conclude you mean to attack them as well!”

“We are not afraid of the continental states. They have their liberty, and it will be a long time before they take action against us.” Cleon grinned. He pulled his hair away from his eyes. “More concerning is islanders such as yourselves. You are embittered by the constraint our empire imposes. You are most likely to act reckless.”

“If this is being taken up to keep your empire, and by your subjects to escape from it,” the Judge sat up straight, looking down at the Aoethian, “then we who are still free would be cowards if we failed to face you rather than submit to slavery.”

“This is no fair fight. There is not honor on one side and shame on the other.” Cleon put his fist on his breastplate and waved at the guards. “This is a question of saving your lives. Save your countrymen by not resisting.”

“We trust that the gods will give us fortune, because we are standing for what is right against what is wrong.” Iota heard unshakable certainty in the Judge’s voice. “What we lack in power, we trust will be made up for by our alliance with Caryae, who are bound for honor’s sake, and because we are their kin. They will come to our aid.”

“As far as the gods are concerned, we have as much right to their favor as you. It is a necessary law of nature to rule whatever one can.” Cleon took turns giving his eyes to the councilmen. He ignored the Judge entirely. “This is not a law we made, nor are we the first to act upon it. We found it, and shall leave it to exist forever among those who come after us. We act in accordance with it, and we know that you or anybody else would be acting in precisely the same way. We see no reason to fear the gods.

“Your views of Caryae, and your confidence that your kin, out of a sense of honor, will come to your aid,” he continued with a wide smile. “When matters concern themselves or their constitution, the Caryaeans are remarkably good. The Caryaeans believe what they enjoy doing is honorable, and what suits their interests is just. That kind of ally will not help you now.”

“It would be a risk worth taking, as we are so close to their lands.” The Judge waved his hand to the east. “We share the same race and the same feelings.”

“Do not be led astray by a false sense of honor. Honor brings men to ruin when they face danger that affects their pride. Dishonor, one simple word, has drawn men into a state where they have surrendered to an idea.” Cleon waved his hands back and forth. He pointed one finger upward. “This is the safe rule – stand up to one’s equals, defer to one’s superiors, and treat inferiors moderately.”

“We will not give up the liberty which our city has enjoyed for 700 years.” The Judge’s voice softened. “We offer to make a treaty, agreeable to us both. Then you may leave our country peacefully.”

“It’s amazing that you consider the future as something more certain than what is before your eyes.” Cleon shook his head in wonder. “You see what you like to see.”

ὄφρα δὲ ᾤκησεν

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The moment Iota stepped out of the city hall a woman took his elbow. She held a spear and steered him to an alley. A large man wearing bronze axes stood behind her. Another man stood near the street, his eyes cold and calculating. The woman had short brown hair and wore battle scarred armor. She held Iota against the wall using a single finger.

“You were in there.” She let her finger off of Iota. “Swear an oath of honesty.”

“To whom am I swearing?” Iota bowed slowly and cautiously.

“Deadfish. Captain of the *Holy Condor*.” Deadfish laid her spear on a crate.

“My name is Iota,” he offered his hand in friendship. “I always speak truth.”

“What happened?” Deadfish shook his hand suspiciously. “Are they surrendering the city?”

“No. They are standing by their principles.” Iota took a deep breath. *Which ensures the death of all of us.* “They will not submit.”

She swore and kicked the crate. Her spear fell with a bang. Iota watched Deadfish’s lieutenants. The bigger one stood anxious and worried. The smaller one was watching passersby. Deadfish resolved herself to picking up her spear and leaning it on her shoulder.

“We need one of those gates opened.” Deadfish spoke with calm authority. “I want us pushing off with tonight’s high tide.”

“If I could help open the gates,” Iota thought he could convince the guards to help. “Would you offer me safe passage to the island of Athos?”

“How?” Deadfish walked up and glared into his eyes.

“This cannot be forgotten.” Iota saw agreement in her eyes. She leaned back and seemed to see him in a new light. “The guards will let us out because we will tell the rest of the world.”

“You don’t know guards very well.” Deadfish scoffed and turned away. “Unless sufficiently bribed, guards are never reasonable. They’ll let you rot in a cell.”

“They would do themselves no good fighting me. My Master taught me how to defend myself.” Iota eyed her lieutenants, wondering what they intended to do with him. “Do we have a deal, if I can get the gates open?”

“If you make it to my ship before we push off.” Deadfish nodded. “I doubt your chances. I want to be on my ship and far from here. If you can’t make it, you’re dead.”

ὄψυχᾶς ὄψιν

Iota stopped when he walked into the dark square. A tingle ran down his spine.

The city of Plaka, Melosa’s capital, was always bright. The city walls were old and sturdy. Worn steps led from the ground to the corners. Large towers held bonfires day and night. Attackers had never snuck up on the city. Iota’s heart dropped when he realized why he stood in shadow.

He raced up the cracked and crumbling stone steps.

Atop the wall was a group of militiamen and the Pontifex of Zynthus. The bonfires were smothered by wet blankets. The watch commander lay bloody and cowering. Three militiamen held bows. Eight others held bronze spears. Iota saw no member of the council.

“What’s going on?” he asked with a bark.

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“We are opening the gates to the divine ruler of this island.” The Pontifex took his walking stick and pointed at city hall. “These people must submit!”

“You are condemning them to death and slavery!” Iota clenched his fists.

“Hark!!” A man yelled from below. “Pirates just ran through the gate!”

The Pontifex looked out over the wall. “Archers, kill them. Bring me that girl!”

“I cannot allow you to hurt them.” Iota bowed eagerly.

“What shall you do, you hopeless heretic?” The Pontifex spit his words with carnal hate. “You are unworthy of the knowledge you seek. Seize him!”

The first spear aimed for Iota’s face. Iota ducked under the bronze tip and drove his foot into the attacker’s leading ankle. Stuck in forward momentum, he lost his spear on the way to the ground. Iota used the weapon to block and parry the advance of two other attackers. Iota located the archers behind them.

The archers were setting their arrows, aiming off the wall, toward his friends.

Iota lifted his spear high above his head and swung. A spearman lunged from Iota’s right. Dodging backward and landed the spear across the attacker’s face. Iota escaped the reach of another spear and dashed toward the archers. He held the spear across his chest and slammed into them.

One archer almost fell off barely hanging on with both hands. Iota took a step back and cracked the butt of his spear on the second archer’s draw hand. The last archer aimed his arrow at Iota’s chest. Iota bounced to the left. The arrow whirled passed his shoulder. Iota drove his spear into the archer’s arm.

Blood exploded onto the stone. The archer curled up, screaming. Iota backed up and dropped the spear. He sat down on his knees. “Help him, please.”

Three men dragged the bleeding archer away. Spears were held up to Iota’s eyelashes. He remained motionless. The Pontifex appeared and the spears retracted. Pontifex held a young girl by her golden hair. The old priest held a silver dagger. It glinted in the moonlight. He locked eyes with Iota and slowly put the blade to her throat.

“Throw another punch and the girl dies.” The Pontifex said cheerfully.

He closed his eyes and tried to meditate.

“Lock him in chains.” The Pontifex sounded disgusted. “He needs an education.”

The militiamen took turns hitting Iota. At first would sit back up defiantly. But soon they became intoxicated in their cruelty. When Iota became too concussed to sit up, they threw him down the steps. Iota lost consciousness staring up at the red moon.

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Chapter 14

DEADFISH ACT IV

Loves Loss

“Our environment gets our attention.”

A.B. Candle, *Walks & Thoughts*

Buyers and sellers bustled about in the Mikonos market. The *Condor* waited in the harbor. Belenas strolled along the colonnade. The air was soaked with the smells of bananas and olive oil. She bought a handful of black figs from a street vender. Sellers announced their wares while she ate the sweet fruit.

Belenas wished Zaphenya walked beside her.

Coins changed hands all around Belenas. She never cared much for bartering. Bumper considered it a sport. He enjoyed haggling and pricing. He would always find the best price. Belenas saw him finishing with a wine seller. Bumper was smiling. He passed without acknowledging her. Belenas followed him slowly.

A man stopped Bumper beside a pelt cart. The man was scrawny and dirty. He had scars on his neck and forearms. He asked to join the crew. Belenas weaved through the crowd to get a closer look. The man had a rusted sword on his belt and nothing else. He listed his exploits arrogantly.

“Why our ship?” Bumper was unimpressed and impatient.

“You fight with the Deadfish. Aoethians killed my family. Any man who kills over a hundred of those bastards earns my respect.” The man put his thumbs on his belt. “Besides, I want to know if the tales of him are true.”

Bumper looked over the man’s shoulder at Belenas. She nodded slowly.

“Fine. Swear the following oath: Swear to protect the *Holy Condor* and all of her crew.” Bumper picked at a tooth. “Consider this company family. Betrayal of this oath is punished with death.”

The man swore the oath and promised to return with his equipment. Belenas watched the man walk proudly down the street. Only then did Belenas spot Orathaus standing in an alley. Belenas smiled. *I didn’t spot him, nicely done.* Orathaus stalked the new recruit and vanished behind a wagon.

Belenas and Bumper waited near the pier. Orathaus returned first.

“He’s a rat. Probably a bounty hunter. He met with a couple Aoethians in a tavern. They paid him silver.”

“Alright... Orathaus: recall the crew.” Belenas sighed and shook her head. “Tell them I’m sorry. Tell them why. Bumper: get Isaac and bring me the betrayer. I’ll find a place where his screams won’t be heard. We’re sailing before his blood cools.”

Without another word both men darted in opposite directions. It wasn’t long before Belenas looked down at the scrawny man with a sack over his head. Isaac leaned

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against the wall near the street. Bumper held him with one hand on the arm. No matter how the oath breaker flailed he could not shake free.

“Let me go!” He screamed from within the knapsack. “I have powerful friends!”

“How many of those friends are with you now?” Belenas used the point of her spear to lift the sack off his head. He looked up at her with bruised eyes. He was breathing heavy. She looked around the alley and addressed him with malice. “I only see people you lied to.”

“Who are *you*?” he ended the futile struggle and slumped down onto his knees.

“I am Deadfish.” She smiled wide. “Captain of the *Holy Condor*.”

“You can’t be serious!” His bloodshot eyes looked to Bumper. He looked up at her slack-jawed. “A woman? I thought that was one of the lies!”

“I love that look.” She leaned close and whispered into his ear. “I control everything you know about me. There’s one thing everyone knows.”

“No! Please, don’t! I can help you!” He shook his head frantically. “Let me go and I can help you! Please!”

“I don’t need your help.” Belenas lifted her spear and took aim at his stomach.

“What about Melosa?” He licked his lower lip. He smiled a snake’s smile. “Lots of Aoethian ships lost sailing past that little island. Must be home, yes?”

“I’m listening.” She tapped her spear with a thumb. Her blood boiled.

“Aoethians are launching an invasion of Melosa. The fleet is already sailing.” He sounded triumphant. “If you leave now you might even beat them there.”

“That *is* information I appreciate,” She thrust her spear into his gut. “But it doesn’t make you any less of an oath breaker. There are few things I take seriously, and oaths are one of them.”

ὄρη δὲ τῆς ὄρειας

Belenas wished she didn’t look so rugged for Zaphenya. Time was short. Aoethian scouts were on the horizon. In her leather armor, Belenas felt like a beggar in the Carrara mansion. In the upper quarter of Plaka, the living room overlooked the bay. Isaac and Bumper stood anxiously in the entryway. They gave Belenas worried looks.

“Only war brings you to me.” Zaphenya crossed her arms.

“I came back for you!” Belenas motioned to the door. “We have to leave!”

“I will not leave my father’s country.” Zaphenya’s eyes were on the bay waters.

“I swore to keep you safe. There is no safety here. Come with me.” Belenas reached for Zaphenya’s hands. Belenas pulled her close. Zaphenya nestled her head on Belenas’ shoulder. Belenas smelled lavender. Belenas whispered into her ear. “Aoethians bring death and slavery. Let me save you and Melina.”

“I won’t leave my father’s house.” Zaphenya pushed her away and turned to look out the window. She balled fists at her sides. “I won’t leave my horses.”

“I swore an oath...” Belenas shook her head bewildered.

“Now you’re going to break it.” Zaphenya pointed to the door. “Just go. Your damned ship is waiting.”

“We could start over...” Belenas swallowed. “Together.”

“With what coin? Pirate loot?” The spiteful words. “I’d rather die.”

“I swore an oath to company and ship.” Belenas felt ashamed for it.

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“More sacred is the oath to a ship than the one to me.” Zaphenya’s blue green eyes were aflame. “I can’t believe I trusted a pirate...”

“I’m here for you! Don’t you understand?” Belenas felt like breaking something. “I’ll take you anywhere! I’ll bring you to your father! Let’s go while there’s time!”

“There is never enough time.” The city watch horns sounded. Zaphenya pushed Belenas toward the door. Bumper and Isaac stood outside with Melina. “I won’t run from tyranny. Time might change us, Bel, but... I will love you forever.”

Zaphenya kissed Belenas and the world melted away.

ὄρη δὲ ὤρη

It was too dark for Melina to be out. Plaka was kept bright, so the darkness meant danger was close. Belenas told her to go home multiple times. Melina continued to follow them through the alley.

“You can’t go!” Melina cried. “You’re part of our family now!”

“I’ve never been family, Melina.” Belenas felt her heart tighten into a fist. Her blood felt poisoned. She spied the city gate. “I’m just a damned pirate. That’s all I’ve ever been.”

“We need you more than ever!” Melina threw her arms around Belenas’ neck. The girl sobbed into her leather breastplate. She trembled and sniffled. “What did we do? Why are we under attack?”

“Go home! Zaphenya will know what to do.” Belenas pushed the child back. “There are dangerous people trapped in this city. Even more dangerous people trapped outside!”

“Captain, they’re opening the gate.” Bumper whispered urgently.

“I have to go now, Melina.” Belenas hugged her with a heavy heart.

“Please... don’t...” Tears streamed down the little girl’s cheeks.

“Deadfish!” Isaac motioned to follow him.

Bumper was already racing for the gate.

“Please forgive me.” Belenas felt tears on her chin. Melina would not look at her.

She darted after her friends. Bumper dropped the gate guards and Isaac relieved them of their weapons. On the wall Belenas saw a bald man looking down at her. *A Spire Priest is helping us? How did the monk manage that?*

Belenas raced through the gate expecting to see an empty field.

Instead she saw a legion of Aoethian shock troops. They huddled along the darkened wall. She kept running. Some of the Aoethians pointed with spears, but none moved. At the bottom of the hill she saw the *Condor’s* sail billowing in the moonlight.

“Archers! Kill the pirates!” A voice boomed off the walls.

The Aoethians shuffled into the gate one by one. *The Spire Priest*, she seethed.

Aboard her ship, she addressed the crew as they rowed in unison.

“What you witnessed today was tyranny! But the *Holy Condor* has no master! She is a hunter! Aoethians are her favorite prey!” Belenas pointed toward the city wall.

“There’s a monster standing on those ramparts tonight. I want to know his name and where he lives. I want the name of the commander. The *Condor* is monster hunting.”

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When the ship was underway, Belenas stood behind her cabin. Her eyes were fixed on Melosa as it grew smaller. Orathaus walked up to Belenas and stood in respectful silence. She still saw the walls in the distance.

They will not take Zaphenya alive. Her chest split with a sharp pain. She tried to breathe normally. *I should have stayed.*

“Master Orathaus, you have words?”

“The man on the ramparts is called İzmir. He is the Pontifex of Zynthus.” Belenas appreciated that Orathaus got right to the point. “He oversees the Aoethian treasury. He was here the last time we were.”

“So another monster has a name.”

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Chapter 15

MONK ACT IV

Solitary Depression

“Avoiding a problem only avoids the solution.”
~ Master Ardal

“Perhaps we should speak in private,” King Anax’s armor gleamed in the sunlight. Parakeets chased one another around stone pillars. The Pontifex was feigning disinterest, smelling the orange flowers. Iota hoped he would not be sent away.

What would a King of Caryae want with the Pontifex? The guards did not appear alarmed. Iota had learned a lot about the Aoethian guards of Zynthus while being their prisoner. They were loyal only to coin. They were practicing professional ignorance. They took pride in hearing nothing and forgetting everything. *Tyrants rule because men refuse to face themselves*, Iota thought.

“The heathen knows the balance of the scale.” The Pontifex shrugged.

“I’m here to honor our agreement.” The King stepped closer to the Pontifex, with an eye on Iota. İzmir pruned a purple flower, as if only half-listening. “I sail south to meet with my fleet. I will use that fleet to destroy Aoethai. I will end this damnable war myself.”

“You leap into the arms of the Bronze Empire!” The Pontifex laughed, waving his sheers. He lifted a yellow flower to the sun. “I will await word of your beheading in the sand. Those mongrels have no decency.”

“The plague took a toll. Aoethai has collapsed into mob rule. They execute generals to promote politicians. You should leave this place.” The King put a hand on his sword, saying each word carefully. “You rule here because of your mercenaries. When your city is burning, Vejovis will retake this sacred island.”

“I rule because of the grace of Godspoint.” The Pontifex raised his hands and looked up at the clouds. “You have worshipped the wrong image. You will submit if you wish to live in heaven.”

“Spare me your archaic babble. I’ve honored my word. My best advice is to stay out of Aoethai.” The Caryaen spun on his heel and took a step toward the archway. The Pontifex used his walking stick to stop the King’s exit.

“There is the proof you seek.” The Pontifex pointed toward the Ancient Obelisk. “Godspoint was here long before Vejovis.”

“The Ancients built those,” Anax snorted.

“To honor Godspoint! He was the first star that rose in the east. Each Obelisk aligned with his star.” The Pontifex smiled like a merchant selling cake. “The Spire is his symbol. He created everything.”

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“What happened to the island of Melosa?” Iota addressed the King and took a step forward. Iota had been held for months without any answers. “Did Caryae come to their aide? Were they able to hold out against the siege?”

“The slave speaks.” Anax squared his shoulders to Iota.

“Persistence has not resolved that yet.” The Pontifex turned a furious eye to Iota. “Speak again and you are destined for the darkness.”

“Did you honor your kin or not?!” Iota shouted.

The Caryaen put a hand on his sword hilt. Iota saw the glimmer of excitement in the Pontifex’s eyes. Iota could not retaliate. King Anax grabbed him by the throat. Iota was shoved into a pillar. “I honor my city. Mind your place. Speaking will only lead you to trouble.”

He released Iota and exited the garden without another word.

“I hoped that you would hit him,” the Pontifex smirked. Iota’s stomach churned. “Then you would admit that you killed an innocent girl.”

“You told me she lived!” Iota’s knees began to buckle.

“She does. Her innocence died the day you stood against the will of Godspoint. You are painted in her blood.” The Pontifex started back toward the Temple. “You are unworthy of our Lord’s love.”

“Let her go,” Iota fell to the ground. He bowed until his forehead touched the grass. The bald man continued to walk away. “Please! Let her go home to her family!”

“Freedom is letting Godspoint into our hearts.”

ὄφκΔὼκϜ

Time was lost within the darkness. Iota tried to meditate but his mind tumbled. The dank room was deep within the Temple. Burnt bread crumbs dropped from a hole in the door at infrequent and random intervals. His thirst drove him to the dirty water that pooled on the floor. Iota heard the screams of a little girl. He didn’t know if the echoes were real.

The Pontifex opened the door and light flooded in. He held Atoch’s calumet and a cup. Iota had not seen the jaguar since Melosa. Iota had forgotten how beautiful the jaguar was. His mind turned to Esmeraldas fondly.

“Water to quench your undeniable thirst. Our Lord is the God of forgiveness.” He poured some of the water onto Iota’s head. “He will welcome you if you accept his title.”

Iota licked at the water running down his face. His body cried out for the cup. He felt his will evaporating. The walls of his mind began to crumble. The Pontifex callously poured the water out onto the floor. He threw the cup out into the hallway.

“When our Father calls, do not hesitate, obey! Your death will only begin your suffering.” The Pontifex dangled the jaguar calumet before Iota’s eyes. “Tell me how the dragon was summoned, and you may have this back.”

The thought sent Iota’s head spinning.

“The dragon...” Iota’s voice was dry and choked, “was raised... by Vejovis... to punish the Ancients.”

“Caryae is full of arrogant tyrants.” The Pontifex nodded to himself. “Vejovis is the god of smite. How did the Ancients raise it? Did this pipe call upon Vejovis?”

Scaling Oath Mountain

“No... Atoch believed in the Great River, not Vejovis.” Iota shook his head from the damp floor. Remembering his friend strengthened Iota’s voice. “The smoke carried prayers to Wōk Tāk. The calumet is a symbol of peace.”

“There is only one symbol of peace,” The Pontifex smashed the jaguar into the wall. Pieces littered the floor. Iota saw the jaguar’s tooth roll down the hall. Iota’s heart sank. “Peace is Godspoint.”

Atoch had trusted Iota with his most precious family heirloom. Iota had been warned to hide it. İzmir shut the door behind him. Darkness consumed Iota again. He felt the grieving eyes of Atoch upon his shoulders.

Ō?χΔΩχƒō

“Get up you worthless wretch!” the words boomed in the small cell.

Two guards entered and kicked Iota in the stomach. The Shotozen monk had no strength. The guards lifted him roughly and dragged him down the hall. Iota saw only blurred shadows and painful light. His feet dragged through a curdled pool on the floor. He smelled vomit. They dropped him into a three legged ornamental chair.

A deep fissure ran across the chamber’s floor.

“Tie him to the Oracle’s seat.” Iota recognized the voice of the Pontifex.

“What...” Iota summoned all his energy to speak. “...happened?”

“This is the room where the prophecies of Vejovis are interpreted. The Oracle proved unable to stomach the authority of her position.” The Pontifex grabbed Iota by the chin, breathing on his face. “Have Vejovis raise the dragon. Direct it against the Caryaens.”

Iota slumped to his side.

“No one commands a god.” Iota’s vision blurred starring into the fissure. “No man directs a dragon.”

“Aoethai will not succumb to barbarism. Raise the dragon and earn your freedom.” The bald man leaned on his staff heavily. “The girl will be sent to her family. I swear it before Heaven.”

“It’s impossible...” Iota shook his head and felt dizzy.

“All things are possible through our Father.” The old man grabbed Iota’s hair. “You are His instrument.”

“I refuse...” Iota tried to swallow, “...to be an instrument of death.”

“Admit that you are a sinner. Repent. Submit to the will of your Lord.” The old man put his hands above his head. “Help defeat the insidious Caryaens or kill a beautiful little girl. You decide.”

Pontifex and guards filed out of the chamber.

Iota noticed the room’s musky aroma. The chamber was tumbling end over end. He hung his head against his chest, struggling to stay conscious. A faint glow rose up from the fissure. A royal blue hue flooded the room.

Two bright eyes snapped open within the cracks. A scaled head raised the eyes off the floor. The head had deer antlers and cow ears. Each scale seemed to reflect moonlight. Tiger paws lifted the scaled beast above Iota. It flew around him in a circle.

Iota followed the eyes, hypnotized. He questioned if he was awake.

My form is invisible to mortals, you see me as you see yourself.

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The words boomed like thunder. “Is this real or illusion?”

Creation is neither one nor the other. I am pleased to find one who is mindful. It is your inward looking eye that grants you true sight. Most men are lost to passions and possessions. The dragon wrapped itself around Iota, enveloping him in loving sparks.

“What has timeless legacy?” Iota felt rejuvenated. He floated off the tripod.

Legacy is tyranny. Men enslaved to their egos. They write their names with their own blood. They build palaces of oppression over themselves. Ego is the world’s most brutal tyrant. As slaves to it, men are grinded into jaded shadows.

“What is man’s true self?” The dragon continued making circles.

You are cosmos. Nothing is separate. You are a unique expression. Search for your ego and find it not. You are every person you meet. You are distracted by a concept of legacy. Every man serving his ego is. History is beneath your skin. The world is behind your eyes.

Iota felt uncomfortable. “Is there but one god called Godspoint?”

Any image is but one aspect of Truth. Names have a tendency to become egos. In life you are born to ignorance, but through life you witness the divine work. I miss my love. I wish to slumber together in our warm cave.

“Has the Pontifex succeeded?” The dragon curled up in front of him.

Look within yourself. Discover the answers. Do not sit in the shadows of other men. Unfold yourself. You will find everything bursting within. It is the illusion of isolation that drives men to the passions of ego.

“Why is it that I have never heard of you?” Iota tried to understand what he was seeing. “I have searched far and wide for your wisdom.”

My lover is of tales. He is an aspect of judgment. Remembered for eons. I am an aspect of compassion. Men do not tell stories about my work. My lover fights men in every cycle. Wrath does not change men. In the end, he only fights himself.

“Is everything futile?” Iota felt gravity again.

Now is never futile. We still have awareness. This world is rich with lovely things. I’ve awoken to find you. I appreciate that. I wish my love would remember the Truth. I cannot free him from delusion.

“What are your names?” Iota worried he would forget. “I wish to honor you.”

I am Kaedru, my love is Veasuki. We have names but we are not separate.

Kaedru lifted her hind talons and presented a sparkling bright pearl.

I bestow a gift. This is not a jewel. This is perception.

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Chapter 16

PONTIFEX ACT IV

Defeated Truth

“Power both ensnares and liberates.”
Crosier 2-8, *Holy Doctrines*

Two guards ushered in a tear-eyed man with blond hair. The man’s hair was tied into a mourning knot. İzmir pruned a bright yellow flower on the western wall. The herald had a familiar face. He wore the ring of Nestor’s personal messengers.

İzmir sighed into the flower.

“King Agis is marching with an army of allies. He has seized Tatoi. He controls our silver mines. With the army engaged on Trinacria, we have no forces to counter with.” The herald continued breathlessly. “They are setting up fortifications to stay the winter. Cutting off the land route to Aoethai indefinitely.”

“What word from Trinacria?” İzmir still held hope for the expedition. “Perhaps they can send troops home?”

“The army is surrounded. The fleet has retreated from the Great Bay. General Lamachus lies dead on the battlefield. Demoseth was dispatched with reinforcements before the Caryaen invasion. They are believed lost as well.” The herald put his hands together and swayed nervously. “The treasury is empty. We cannot continue the war.”

“Godspoint shall bring our army home victorious. They have Nikas and Demoseth with them.” İzmir wished that Cleon had been in command instead. He dropped the sheers into the grass. “They won at Pylos.”

“Nikas is too cautious! He has only allowed the enemy to gather strength.” The herald shook his fist in the air. His shoulders slumped and the herald sighed. “Nestor would never have led us here.”

“Where is Cleon?”

“Campaigning to retake Semestra,” The herald’s eyes became slits. “Those Caryaens should be butchered for breaking the treaty!”

In all the years overseeing the Oracle of Zynthus, İzmir had never felt so alone. He bowed before the Ancient Spire. He prayed to Godspoint. *My mother’s prayers saved Aoethai before, and mine shall save it again.*

ὄφρα δὲ ἴδῃ

Pontifex Tacchi Pacelli was led into İzmir’s office by the Commander of the High Guard. Pontifex Pacelli was a big man with battle scars from his time as a Spire Sword. He wore expensive robes and held an ornate scepter. He exchanged no pleasantries.

“The expedition to Trinacria has failed. Nikas and Demoseth were publicly executed in Cyrakusa. We lost 200 ships and 10,000 of our best men.” Pacelli had no hint

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of hope in his voice. He spoke with cold numbers. Pacelli shrugged. “Now Aoethai only has the long walls. We’re ordered to consult the Oracle. Ask her what can be done. Perhaps she might bring a message from Godspoint.”

“Is not her religion false and her method sin?” İzmir couldn’t believe his ears.

“Everything is holy in Godspoint. Our sins are behind us.” Pacelli leaned in and pointed to the door. “You have the witch. Use her.”

İzmir commanded that the Oracle be brought to the adytum. The Oracle could only work in the deepest chamber. The priestesses cried objections. İzmir ordered the guards to force her. There was terror in the Oracle’s eyes. She had sworn to only give prophesies on the seventh day of the month.

She flailed until she fell. She howled in pain. She retched across the floor.

ὄψυχῶν ὄψις

The commander stood with İzmir. They both silently watched the commotion at the dock. The patrol boats were being hastily secured. Storm clouds gathered in the west. İzmir looked toward the sea in defeat. He tried to hide that gloom. He smiled weakly at the commander.

“That wayward monk spent his life searching for the Leviathan.” Pacelli had returned to Aoethai. Pacelli thought the island had become useless. İzmir swallowed. The commander did not seem reassured. “Godspoint will work through him.”

“Will we be judged for killing the Oracle?” The commander shifted nervously. “Or judged for calling upon a heathen god?”

“The Oracle was unable to carry the weight of her office. Her faith was impure.” İzmir faked a smile. “The heathen is here to raise the Leviathan.”

“I have two men outside his door. Shall we go get him?”

“There is no alternative for him except to submit to Godspoint.” Thunder announced the first heavy drops of rain. Lightning spread from cloud to cloud. Heavier thunder shook the ground. “This storm wants to be known.”

İzmir saw the sea swirling. Bubbles exploded on the crest of a wave. The sea rushed back. A large tail rose up above the wave. İzmir felt his stomach drop. The tail slammed into the dock and snapped a boat in half. Boards and men were thrown into the water.

“Archers form up!” The commander ran up the hill to gather his men.

“No! Don’t attack!” İzmir grabbed the commander’s cape. “It was summoned to destroy Caryae!”

“It’s killing my men! You Spire Priests think you control everything!” He slapped İzmir’s hand away and pointed into the sea. “You control *nothing!*”

Lightning leapt across the sky. İzmir saw the sea swell. Water rolled off a scaled body. Two bright orange pearls stared back at him. Lightning reflected off dark red scales. A scaled head with shaggy hair lifted out of the water. The sea around the creature boiled and hissed.

“Fire!” the commander screamed from atop the hill.

Arrows bounced off the beast harmlessly. The leviathan turned and opened its jaw toward the archers. Flames lurched out and engulfed the men. The others dropped their bows and fled. İzmir tasted blood in his mouth. Sulfur filled his nose.

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İzmir dropped to his knees, looking up at the dark clouds.
Orange eyes looked down at İzmir. The burning pearls of light mesmerized him.
Wrath breeds hate. Hate breeds death. The words boomed inside İzmir's skull.
Death is the end of your illusion. Watch your world crumble. Watch the fires of you started.

The beast turned east. It sank back into the wind whipped waves. İzmir fell down into the grass. *Caryae is to the north. The Leviathan is attacking Aoethai.* He collapsed into the rain soaked soil. *I am nothing.*

Scaling Oath Mountain

Chapter 17

DEADFISH ACT V

Furious Talons

“The All is living endlessly.”
Tai Wu, *Studies in Silence*

The nightmare haunted Belenas every time she slept. Zaphenya out of reach, Belenas helplessly watching her die. For two years closing her eyes meant torture. Aoethians pillaged Plaka. Settlers had infested Melosa. Zaphenya was killed by soldiers defending her home. No one knew what happened to Melina.

Belenas looked up at the stars. The constellations faded in the dawn light. The *Holy Condor's* crew assembled on the beach. Across the sea was Zynthus. The Oracle's island and host to the Aoethian treasury. The crew was eager to have silver in their pockets again.

Belenas wasn't interested in coin. She wanted a monster named İzmir. The Spire Priest appointed to keep the Oracle in line and the treasury safe. For his part in killing Zaphenya, İzmir would die by her blade. They set sail as the sun rose.

Zynthus was a small island. A town surrounded the Temple. It was only bustling during festivals. Since the annexation of Zynthus, pilgrims found it far more expensive. Some were even turned away.

Belenas saw two boats splintered against the rocks. The water was free of fishing boats. Burnt oars lay strung along the bank. The green hill was littered with bows. The *Holy Condor* ran aground. Two marines stayed with the ship. Belenas struck out with the rest of her crew.

They climbed the grass hill toward the Temple. She saw no one in sight. The Aoethian docks were washed up on the beach. The locals were hiding. She reached the Temple before seeing anyone in the streets. Flying over the Temple she saw the unmistakable banners of the High Elite Guard.

The company passed quietly through side streets. The *Holy Condor* had been hunted for a long time. They stood their ground against pirate hunters. But they had never crossed spears with High Elites. Many had fought against the Bronze Empire. When they rounded the last corner she faced nine fully armored High Guards.

Belenas saw the armored man drop. An arrow stood proud between helmet and chest plate. Orathaus was the first to kill one of them. Belenas grinned. The closest High Guard sat on his helmet against a Temple pillar. Belenas took a firm step forward, driving her spear into his eye socket. The crew gave out their war cries.

Belenas found İzmir weeping in the Temple garden.

“What happened here?” Belenas spoke slowly, holding the spear to his throat.

“Godspoint's Leviathan is punishing the impure.” Tears ran down his cheeks.
“Our city is unworthy.”

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“Do you remember another city named Melosa?” Belenas’ jaw clinched.

“Yes.” He starred at the ground. “Melosa was destroyed by pride as well.”

“No. Melosa was destroyed by treachery.” Belenas leaned in and spoke through her teeth. “Who was the Aoethian General? Tell me where to find him.”

“His name is Cleon. He is a hero.” *At least he hasn’t lied about that*, she thought. “He is the host of all the Aoethian forces in Edonia. Pride will end you as it ended me.”

“Pride does not end you. *I* end you.” She thrust the bronze blade into his heart. She twisted the spear before pulling it out. She watched him die. “I am Deadfish, and my love will rest peacefully.”

She turned around to see confused faces. Isaac and Orathaus stood at the doorway of the temple. They should be victorious, instead they looked defeated. Belenas saw them look at one another sheepishly. She knew neither wanted to bear the news.

“The treasury was moved.” Orathaus reported. He let out a long sigh. “After Trinacria... it was relocated to Aoethai.”

“Some of the men think you knew.” Isaac spoke uneasily. He walked out into the garden. “That you lied, blinded by vengeance.”

“That’s outrageous!” Belenas felt her heart sink into her stomach. Her knees became weak. *How could they think such things?* “I would never lie to them.”

“I didn’t say I believed it.” Isaac shook his head then shrugged. “It’s just something I’ve heard said, and not amongst the veterans.”

“One other thing, Captain.” Orathaus stepped up holding a broken piece of meerschaum. “I found a monk you know.”

ὄρη Δωδεκάηχο

Cleon had orders to retake Semestra. Caryae captured the city during the war, but had refused to return to Aoethai. Belenas chose to strike just after the city fell. With his men busy looting or rotting, it would be easier to get close to Cleon. Semestra had fallen in the night.

Belenas went ashore with her lieutenants. She ordered the crew to be ready for a quick push off. The crew was confused but complied. Isaac was the first to speak up. He eyed Belenas critically.

“I thought we were all going.” Isaac nodded toward the *Condor*.

“Change of plans. I don’t want the company to bleed for my revenge.” Belenas looked at Isaac, Bumper and Orathaus each in turn. She saw the unshakable loyalty in their eyes, but the Monk had made her think. “I want you all living at sunset. I want you all enjoying drinks and women tomorrow. Celebrate my life.”

“I hope you really don’t think you’re going alone.” Isaac chuckled and shook his head. “We practiced this too many times.”

“I can’t promise your return.”

“I’ve never expected what you can’t promise! This is where we find this monster.” Isaac put a thumb on the edge of a dagger’s blade. “This is where we kill him. Let me worry about me.”

“The best kind of people lived on Melosa, and I won’t let that man to go on breathing.” Bumper crossed his muscular arms. “We all die... the only thing that defines us is how.”

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“This is my fight, not yours.” Belenas began to walk up the hill.

“I chose this ship instead of a pickaxe. If I die in bed, then I’ll die with fond memories of bleeding with you all.” Bumper’s normally stoic eyes were glazing over. “I refuse to look back in shame.”

“You’re not leaving me!” Orathaus spoke up with fear in his voice.

“Stay with the *Condor*. Wait as long as you can for these two. Don’t wait for me. Leave when you see Aoethian ships.” Belenas put her hands on Orathaus’ shoulders. “The *Holy Condor* is your ship now. Make sure nothing happens to her.”

“But... I’m not ready...” Orathaus shifted nervously.

“Kid, listen, you’re never ready! For anything!” Bumper smacked him on the back of the head. “Just get out there and do it already. You’ll figure it out if you’re bright enough. You’re already twice as smart as most captains out there!”

“Become the king of the sea, Orathaus.” Isaac grinned and messed up the boy’s hair. “Kill as many Aoethians as you can to honor us.”

“Take care of your people.” Belenas looked hard into his eyes. She tried to press the idea firmly into Orathaus’ mind. “You only have your people.”

ὄρη δὲ ὤρει

“I can’t wait to announce this to the Assembly,” Cleon stood up with a stumble, knocking over the bottle red wine. The tent was a mess. Belenars had thought he would be inside the city with his troops. Instead they found him in the same tent he had besieged the city from. Two guards stood guard inside. Three women lay naked on Cleon’s bed.

Always louder with an audience, Belenas thought.

“Let’s look at the sea scourge.” Cleon stumbled up to Isaac and Bumper. Isaac’s forearms were tied with anchor rope from wrists to elbows. Bumper held Isaac by the neck. “Many pirates cause my people grief, but none as brashly as the Fanatical Deadfish.”

Never heard that one before, Belenas smirked.

“By Godspoint look at you!” Cleon looked up at Bumper. Belenas stood between Isaac and one of the guards. “With a legion your size I could conquer the world!”

“I was promised double for bringing him alive.” Bumper spit onto the floor.

“You were lied to! I wouldn’t pay that for a King of Caryae.” Cleon slapped Bumper on the shoulder. He laughed toward the women. “Bounty hunters always ask for too much!”

Then he took notice of Belenas. Cleon stumbled in front of Bumper to get close. Cleon looked her up and down. The guards were watching the women in the back of the tent. They spoke to one another with disinterest in the affairs of state around them.

“Whose woman?” Cleon scratched his chin thoughtfully.

“Mine.” Bumper growled with unrestrained rage. “Where is my payment?”

“Don’t outlive your usefulness, dog! I like good hunters, but tongues like yours get cut out!” Cleon turned to face Isaac. “Deadfish. Why make yourself such an enemy of the world’s greatest empire?”

“Your empire is the world’s greatest enemy!” Isaac spit in Cleon’s eye

Isaac pivoted on his heel. Bumper charged backwards, his sword slashing into the guard’s neck. Facing Belenas, Isaac pulled his forearms apart and let the rope fall.

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Belenas took the dagger Isaac pressed into her palm and leapt forward. Her eyes locked onto Cleon's throat and grabbed it.

The women screamed. Belenas held her dagger above Cleon's eye.

"Six years ago on Melosa, you started this." she pressed the tip into his forehead. "You brought this blade here."

"Hurt me and my men will kill you!" Blood ran into his eyes.

"You took away the love of my life." Belenas felt her hand shake. She brought her breath back under control. "My name is Deadfish."

Cleon's eyes bulged wide.

"I love that look," Belenas gutted him.

She turned around to see two dead guards. Isaac and Bumper had their backs to her. They fought Aoethians outside the tent. She stepped over Cleon and admired his blood soaking into the earth. She grabbed Cleon's spear and left the wailing women.

Aoethians surrounded them. Cleon's tent was at the top of the hill. Spears pointed at them from every direction. The three stood apart with inviting stances. Spear tips multiplied. Soon they were pressed against one another.

Bumper flurried his swords and pushed back. Belenas disarmed two Aoethians. Isaac's side bleed. He flared his nose and stood his ground against another push. They focused on him and attacking his injured flank. Isaac's lacerated body hit the ground. Bumper had a spear in his gut.

Belenas felt a sword slam into the back of her neck. Spears from all directions closed in. Another thump against her neck sent the world spinning. Everything dissolved into a white fog. She could not move. Belenas' body evaporated.

Beyond the fog rang Zaphenya's silky voice.

"My love, we are whole again."

Scaling Oath Mountain

Chapter 18

KING ACT V

Blood Ties

“Stars think like men,
Light is their heartbeat.”
A.B. Candle, *Skyward Sights*

Caryaens stood in a Bronzite hall for the first time in decades. Anax and Lysander were dwarfed by the throne room. Slaves stood in the corners holding baskets of bright fruits. The golden throne had intricate inlaid gemstones. Two fires crackled on either side of the steps. Atop was the Bronze Empire’s Regional Vizier, the second son of the King.

Prince Cyrus was not older than twenty. He sat on his throne with silent dignity. The throne’s arms were the shape of fierce lions. The lions were ready to pounce. As a Regional Vizier, he had the power of the entire Bronze Empire at his back.

“I trust you have been well received.” His voice was still that of a boy.

“Your slaves have been generous...” Anax had refused all of the gifts. When offered feasts of food, he had asked for black broth. “I am a simple man, raised in our Old Ways.”

“They are not slaves. They are subjects, bearing fruit from their homelands. Our kingdom stretches the entire world.” Cyrus waved his arms about the hall. “Rest assured I force no custom onto you, keep whatever beliefs you like. I rule over more people than any Vizier before me. Why do I grant an audience with the oldest King of Caryae?”

“Although the Aoethians have lost their army, they still control the sea. We cannot starve the city without a fleet.” Anax saw the boy smile upon his throne. “It would be favorable for us both to end the Aoethian Empire.”

“Lysander at your side, he has my respect. He is a skilled admiral.” The prince smiled. “I was also told that your father was an admirer of our ways. I have met few Caryaens who can appreciate our luxury.”

“My mother raised me traditionally. I prefer the simple life.” Anax could hear the Ephors calling him a traitor. Any alliance with the Bronze Empire would never gain him allies. “I am here on behalf of my countrymen. I’m old, and I seek to end this war. I care only about the security of my city.”

“You must promise not to set up your own Empire.” The boy pointed at Anax accusingly. Then he made a fist. “You must cede every city that we currently control.”

“We can agree to that if you help us defeat Aoethai,” Anax lifted a rolled parchment. “You may keep any of the lands your forbearers conquered.”

“Then let us build you a fleet! I will pay for sailors and use my naval forces to assist you.” The boy prince waved a hand and a scribe brought forth a desk. The scribe took the parchment and unrolled it on the desk. “You may repay me with troops.”

ὈΨΥΔΩΨΥῚ

Months passed with no sign of the promised navy. Anax and Lysander stood on a balcony overlooking the port of Miletus. A bowl of grapes sat the balcony table. Inside the palace suite were soft couches covered in silk pillows. Anax walked across the thick carpet and sat on the floor.

Lysander slumped against the balcony's rail with a sigh. He poured his cup of wine out over the railing. Anax saw him look into the cup contemplatively. Lysander dragged his feet back to the wine table and refilled his cup. He pointed to the cushioned couch behind Anax.

"Why won't you sit where you'd be comfortable?"

"I am not to be bought with soft things." Anax began to clean his sword. "The boy prince hasn't come through on his side of the bargain, so I have no reason to relax."

"It's not like Cyrus to keep us waiting... I believe his brother may have something to do with this..." Lysander cursed into his cup. He crouched next to Anax. "Perhaps his older brother has allied with Aoethai!"

"If that were true we would already be dead." Anax sharpened his sword.

"The Senate will not be pleased with this delay..." Lysander wiped his purple lip.

"The Ephors and Senate would not be satisfied with complete victory." Anax scoffed while he returned sword to sheath. "I've dealt with their fickle minds all my life. I have realized there's no limit to the harsh judgments of men."

"Don't you fear they will compare this with your father's treason?"

"I am *not* my father. I have not abandoned the Old Ways. I require no man to bow to me. I dress as the First Kings did. Let them accuse me." Anax hung his sword next to his armor. "Luxury makes men soft. A soft man easily loses his sword."

"When we had our victory at Notium, it was because of the Aoethian fleet."

Lysander looked out toward the sea. He craved a battle. His feet drifted toward the balcony. *Caryaens are not meant to be wasted in comfort*, Anax thought. "So sure of victory they could not see their defeat."

Guards opened the suite's doors. A Bronzite messenger entered. She had dark brown skin and wore every manner of jewelry. The guards posted themselves inside the room. The messenger extended her hands toward the hall.

"Prince Vizier has granted you an audience."

Anax and Lysander were led down the warmly lit hallway. The doors to the throne room were three times the size of the hall itself. They were pulled back with substantial effort from a pair of servants on both sides. The boy prince was standing in front of his throne.

"My father has requested me at his court. I am obliged to leave my provinces by his command. I will leave Lysander in my stead. Build your fleet." The boy looked down at Anax with a piercing stare. "I expect my generosity will be remembered. There will be a time when I have need of troops. I want the best in the world."

ὈΨΥΔΩΨΥῚ

Scaling Oath Mountain

At the beginning of summer Lysander led the fleet to victory in three battles. Anax was glad to be a figurehead. The particularities of naval warfare alluded Anax. There were no armies to lead into battle. Anax was bedridden with sickness for most of the voyage.

Caryaens had always relied upon their army to secure victory. Against the naval power of Aoethai no army could isolate the city. With a Caryaen admiral and a Bronzite fleet, the greatest navy in the world was collapsing. Lysander's cunning command of the sea was unmatched.

Anax thought people would forget the allies that made peace possible. Anax was sure that accusations would fly. But they would be overshadowed by the victory. *I would rather end the war than keep my face.*

The allied fleet sailed unchallenged into Aoethai's harbor. The once bustling port seemed to have been hit with a tsunami. Triremes lay beached and in pieces along the shore. Anax saw enormous breaches along the long walls. The entire harbor was covered with a layer of ash.

The warehouses had been burned to the ground.

Anax saw no Aoethian flags flying. Agis had no siege weapons. It appeared as though a volcano had erupted, but there were none nearby. Two fully armored hoplites and King Agis approached the flagship.

"What happened?" Anax yelled down eagerly.

"Last night the city erupted in flames. At dawn we found the walls ruined. We dismantled the garrison. Survivors claim a sea dragon is responsible." Agis pointed to the city's Acropolis. "Two groups of resistance persist. One holed up in the Acropolis. The other in the Spire."

"Did any of ours see it?" Lysander jumped down onto the pier.

Agis and Lysander embraced affectionately.

"No. But most of the city's garrison was burned and mangled." Agis shrugged. He pointed at Anax. "How did you enjoy Zynthus? What kept you on the lap of the Bronze King for so long?"

Anax decided to ignore his counterpart.

"Lysander, go with Agis and help find our allies amongst the oligarchs." Anax pointed at the wall that ran from the sea to Aoethai. "I will tear down the remaining fortifications. Aoethai should never have long walls again."

"You are not staying here at all. You've been recalled." Agis stepped onto the boat. The hoplites followed him aboard. "You're to stand trial for treason."

No one spoke to Anax during the entire journey home. Agis took his father's sword. Anax was bound and bloodied by heavy iron chains. The chains were removed only before the Senate. The Ephors stood silent to one side. Anax recognized his father's sword hanging from Agis' belt. The Senate found Anax guilty of taking bribes of silver on Zynthus.

Anax was branded a traitor to the Old Ways. He died in exile.

Scaling Oath Mountain

Chapter 19

MONK ACT V

Commiserate Return

“Music plays in the heart of all things.”
~ Book of Notes

“I should be rowing with the others.” Iota could barely lift his head off the pillow.

“You’re a guest. Guests don’t touch oars aboard my ship.” Deadfish looked back at the young man standing at the door. “You saved our lives, and now we’ve saved yours. We’re square.”

“You killed the Pontifex?” Iota’s memory was blurry.

“I hope they sing songs about it. He was a monster.” She wore a savoring smile. “The deal was to bring you to Athos. We’re almost there.”

“What happened to Melosa?” Iota could tell the question upset her.

“The Aoethians burned everything and put the men on pikes. They sold the women and children. That’s why I have another man to kill.” She was determined and unapologetic. She peered out the window. “Do you know why I was in Melosa? The most wonderful woman was born on that damned island. They killed my Zaphenya.”

“You cannot hold the past within you.”

“I have accepted death.”

“What about the lives of your men?” Iota heard singing outside. He took a deep breath and closed his eyes. “When we harm others, we only harm ourselves. I finally understand why my Master forbids me from taking a life. I was ensnared by the tyrant-ego.”

“Would you have...” Deadfish whispered, “if he hadn’t forbidden it?”

“Before Zynthus,” Iota thought of Esmeraldas. He remembered the graves of Atoch’s children. Iota remembered the fury he had felt. “Perhaps.”

“What happened to you in there? Isaac didn’t think you would make it.”

“I met the dragon of compassion, Kaedru. She held up a mirror. I saw the cosmos.” Iota pulled himself up in the hammock. His legs felt numb and weak. “We have built identities upon illusion. I carry an ego that does not exist.”

“He hit you too many times over the head...” Deadfish laughed. The boy giggled.

“The Pontifex was misguided, and disturbed,” Iota could not understand the old man’s hatred. “But he was like any of us. We share the same source.”

“He must’ve broke you. I would never let Aoethians massacre Melosa!” Deadfish’s nose flared. “He imprisoned Melina. He *tortured* you. A thousand deaths are not enough for him.”

“I am thankful for your help,” Iota shook his head. “But shedding blood accomplishes nothing.”

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“It removed one more oarhole, and I’m satisfied with that. If it makes you feel better, we were there to steal the Aoethian treasury.” A twinkle in her eye made her smile again. “Well... I was there for him. We thought you were killed with everyone else ... until Orathaus found you.”

“You’ll still need a bath when you get to Athos.” Orathaus held his nose.

“I’m thankful that you protected Melina.” Deadfish solemnly locked eyes with Iota. Her voice was heavy with reverence. “I will owe you forever.”

“Where is she?” Iota felt his heart jump.

“She will become the new Oracle. The priestesses said the monster killed the last one. Supposedly Vejovis brought Melina to them.” Deadfish breathed unevenly. “Her family was put to the blade. She will be safe in the Temple.”

“I am glad.” Iota fell into the pillow and felt the hammock rock. He let out a long breath. The rowers stopped singing. Iota could hear them getting up from their benches. “I feared the worst for so long...”

“Accept fear and have no delusions. The worst things in this world have already happened. No sense getting worked up over it.” Deadfish stepped closer to the hammock. “Just fix what you can. For me, that’s killing men like Cleon. For you, it’s telling the Monks of Athos about what happened on Melosa.”

“I will tell every open ear.” Iota nodded.

“Captain!” A deep voice yelled from outside. “We’re docked!”

“We should get you ashore, seeing as we are being vigorously hunted.”

Iota’s legs were still feeble. Deadfish and Orathaus carried him across the deck. Mount Athos stood tall over their heads. A thick green forest shrouded the base of the mountain. The wooden dock showed signs of abandonment. The warm sun kissed Iota’s face and filled him with joy.

A tightly dressed monk stood at the bottom of the stairs. He held his arms up.

“Women are not allowed here.” The man looked down at his sandals. “This is the space of the Holy Mother.”

“Get out of the way!” Deadfish snapped. “Does it look like he can make it up those steps by himself?”

“This island is off limits to women.” The monk swallowed and took a step backward. He added sheepishly, “by holy decree.”

Iota was lifted roughly into the air. Bumper threw Iota over a shoulder and started toward the stairs. The monk stumbled back as they passed. Bumper walked with a bounce in his step. He whistled as if out for a stroll, carrying Iota with ease. He stopped and sighed, turning to the ship.

“Don’t dawdle! I’ll be right back! I wanna get out of here quick! No women? What’s holy about *that*?!” The crew roared with laughter. Bumper sang a song about a woman he loved. He sang as loud as he could.

ὄψυχῶν ὄψις

“What brings you to our holiest island?” the monk superior asked.

Iota looked up into the chestnut canopies. The two men walked beside a gentle creek. The water glittered in the sunlight. The monastery practiced meditation which

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from him in all directions. He heard the heartbeat of everyone in the world. Iota felt oneness with both dragon and child.

“I am pleased to see you again, Iota.” Ardal carried onions and red peppers up the stairs. Despite the recent downpour Master’s habit was dry. Ardal had not aged a day. He dropped his things inside and sat down next to Iota. “Did you find what you were searching for?”

“The self is illusion.” Iota said confidently. He saw pride on Master Ardal’s face.

“So do you know the Truth?” Master raised an eyebrow.

“I have said nothing.” Iota closed his eyes. “I have only just awoken.”

About the Author

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I found this **idea**

It belongs to us *all*

The idea is **to be**

The order is *love*

Every **science** and *spirituality*

Looks up into the **sky**

Sees the same *moon*

Mind measures the same *divine*

Perspectives vary in *human* fashion

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